Weird Tales

JULY
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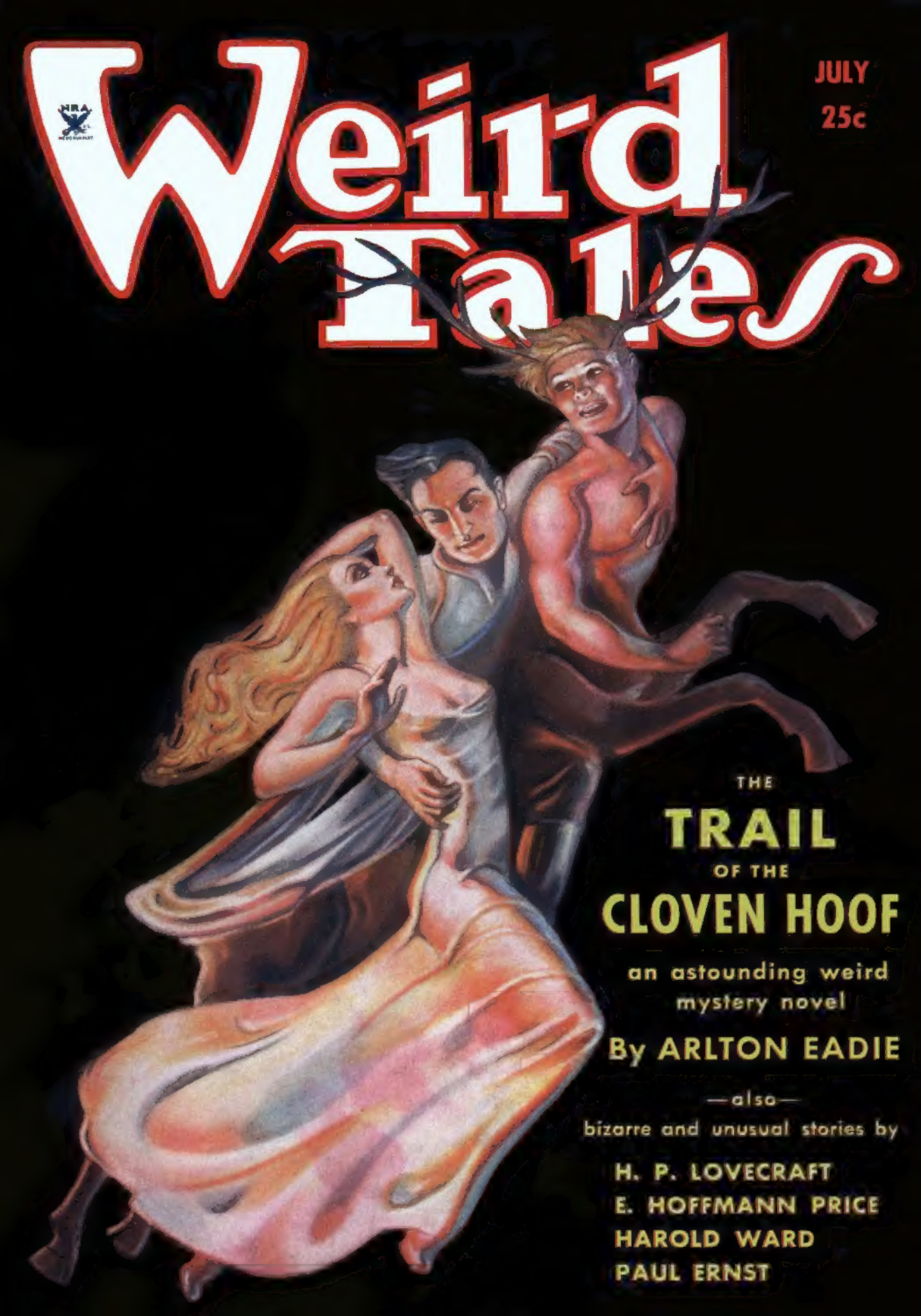

THE
TRAIL
OF THE
CLOVEN HOOF

an astounding weird mystery novel

By ARLTON EADIE

—also—

bizarre and unusual stories by

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Weird Tales

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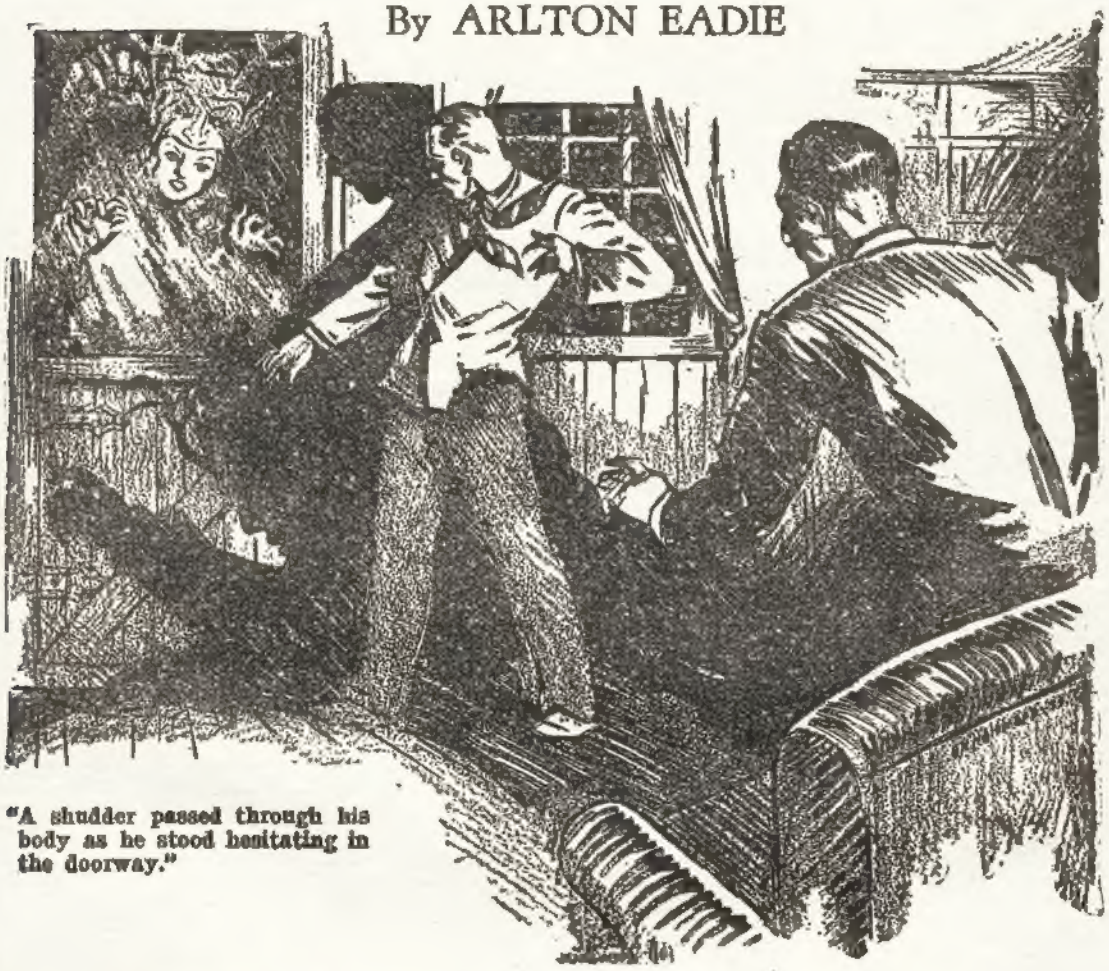
WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof

By ARLTON EADIE



"A shudder passed through his body as he stood hesitating in the doorway."

A startling weird mystery story, of strange deaths on the desolate moor of Exham, and the mysterious creature known as "The Terror of the Moor"

VAGUE and muffled, the sound of a shot floated to Hugh Trenchard's ears through the veil of mist which, white and luminous in the moonlight, hung over the desolate moor. He paused in his stride and stood listening, a puzzled expression on his rather good-looking features.

"If the weather were clear, I should say it was some enthusiastic sportsman putting in a bit of night-gunning," he muttered to himself. "But that's absurd. Why, it's impossible to see more than a few yards in any direction, and——"

Plop! . . . plop! . . . "Help!"

The faint shout that followed the two rapid shots showed unmistakably that something more serious than sport was

afoot, and Trenchard without a moment's hesitation quitted the meandering sheep-track, along which he had been carefully picking his way, and began to scramble down the heather-clad hillside. Well enough he knew the difficulty of locating the direction whence the sounds had come; and he was not unmindful, either, of the risk he ran in blundering thus blindly through a part of Exmoor that was quite unknown to him. But for the moment he was only concerned with the possibility of finding a treacherous, impassable quagmire at the bottom of the valley which wound at the base of the steep tor he was now descending; his one comfort was the indubitable fact that the sounds could not have come from any great distance, otherwise they would not have reached him through the blanket of fog.

In a few minutes he had reached the foot of the slope, to find himself confronted with a dense thicket of undergrowth. He paused for an instant to listen, but the cries had been succeeded by a deep and sinister silence.

"Ahoy!" he shouted with the full force of his lungs. "Ahoy!"

Hugh Trenchard had not the remotest connection with the sea, but he knew from experience that the deep-throated nautical hail would carry farther than any other shout. Scarcely had it left his lips when, with a loud crashing of the bushes, a huge form loomed vaguely through the mist and swiftly vanished up the valley.

There was a tight-lipped smile on Trenchard's face as he lowered the stout ash walking-stick which he had raised instinctively. It was, he reflected, only one of the wild forest ponies which roam over Exmoor. Yet something must have scared it badly to have sent it careering through the brake in that headlong fashion. Moved by this thought, he turned

● It is our extreme pleasure to offer you herewith an intriguing mystery novel by an English master of fantastic fiction, Arlton Eadie. The many ramifications of the mystery are a sure cure for somnolence, and the threads of the plot are woven together with the art of a master-craftsman. But this story is more than merely a fascinating mystery novel, for it is essentially a weird tale. Those of you who recall this author's serial story, "The World Wrecker," printed in WEIRD TALES several years ago, will turn with eagerness to the tale that begins in this issue: "The Trail of the Cloven Hoof."

in the direction whence it had come, and after hurrying a few hundred yards had the satisfaction of seeing a yellowish glow amid the ghostly whiteness of the mist. A few more paces, and he could make out the shape of a door standing open. He broke into a run—only to stop with a jerk as he saw the body of a man lying directly in his path.

A cursory examination showed him that the man still lived, though his head was terribly injured. Apparently it was he who had fired the shots, for when Trenchard lifted him, a heavy automatic pistol dropped from his nerveless grasp.

Quickly carrying him into the house, Trenchard laid him on the settee and—his repeated calls having brought no response from the silent house — at once filled a basin with water from the kitchen tap and set about rendering first aid. With the sure, deft touch of one trained in the healing art, the young man washed the wound and bandaged it with strips which he tore from a clean bedsheet that was airing in front of the fire. This ac-

complished to his satisfaction, he removed the man's outer clothing, carried him upstairs, and put him into the first bed he came across.

Returning to the kitchen, he made a hurried, but futile, search for a hot-water bottle; in the end he used a large flat-iron which, heated on the fire, wrapped in blankets, and placed at the patient's feet, proved a very effective substitute. His quest for stimulants occasioned an even longer search, but finally he found an unopened bottle of brandy—and, incidentally, several other things which gave him plenty of food for thought as he sat by the bedside waiting for the first signs of returning consciousness.

In spite of his youthful appearance, Hugh Trenchard was a full-fledged M. D., having received final degree just over a month since. It was as a relaxation from the strain of studying for his examination that he had embarked on his present hiking tour through Somerset and Devon, choosing his route as the fancy took him, sleeping at chance-found country inns and village taverns; his mind devoid of all care or plans for the future, content to revel in the wide, heather-clad moors, the wind-swept skies, the smiling pastures and nestling homesteads of the West Country; his soul passing through that curious chrysalis stage when the irresponsible medical student develops into the staid medical practitioner.

EVERY doctor is a potential detective; accustomed as he is to deduce the malady from the symptoms, he naturally applies the same mental process to other matters, and Hugh Trenchard was no exception to this rule. As he sat there, his favorite briar pipe gripped between his teeth, his keen gray eyes veiled in thought, his mind was busily probing the mystery into which he had unwittingly stepped.

That the old man had been the victim of a murderous attack there could be no question. That he had feared such an attack was equally plain; the newly fitted bars on the windows of the house and the perfect armory of weapons which he had discovered in his search told that much. Yet, if the man had suspected his life to be in danger, why had he remained here, a solitary recluse, in the loneliest part of the moors? And why had he run out into the mist to court the very peril he had guarded himself against so carefully? Had his assailant been a tramp in quest of plunder? Trenchard shook his head slightly as he dismissed the thought; the house, though fairly large, bore no evidences that its owner was in affluent circumstances.

Tilting the shade of the lamp so that its light was deflected onto the pillow, Hugh Trenchard intently examined the face of the injured man. His age might be fifty, or slightly more, for his face was deeply lined and his hair and short, full beard were iron-gray. It was a face of unusual refinement, with the brow of a thinker, a face of the type which one sees often when men of science meet in conclave. Who and what was he?

A faint, long-drawn sigh from the injured man snapped Trenchard's train of thought. Pouring some brandy into a spoon, he succeeded, after some trouble, in inducing the now half-conscious man to swallow it, and after a few minutes had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes open and a faint tinge of color come into the ashy cheeks. His lips moved slightly, and the young doctor bent closer to catch the halting words:

"The Terror of the Moor!" It was a mere whisper, yet the awesome horror that vibrated through it sent a chill through the hearer's blood. "The Terror that walks by night—the foul, cloven-

hoofed shape that glides through the darkness, seeking whom it may destroy! Why does God suffer such fiends to stray from their native hell?"

"Of what do you speak?" Hugh asked gently, as the rambling voice died away.

"I swore that I would destroy it," the man continued as if he had not heard the question. "But it has destroyed me instead. I would die content if I had rid the earth of this monstrous being; but I have failed — miserably failed — yet another victim of the Terror of the Moor!"

Naturally the young doctor's first thought was that the man was delirious, but a closer examination revealed none of the symptoms consistent with such a theory. The pulse, though feeble, was slow and regular, his skin was cool and moist, his eyes lacked the wild stare that usually accompanies rambling and incoherent utterances. The man seemed to read the thoughts that were passing through Hugh's mind, for he observed, with the ghost of a smile:

"Doubtless you are wondering if my words are the irresponsible ravings of a madman—I am almost inclined to wish that you were right! But I can assure you that the Terror of the Moor is a real, tangible being—solid and substantial enough to have caused this." He made a slight gesture toward his bandaged head. "But I will not deny that my mind is a little confused from the blow. Tell me what happened."

Hugh Trenchard shrugged as he shook his head.

"As to that, I fear I am as much in the dark as you appear to be," he replied. "I had lost my way in the mist—thought I was miles away from any human habitation—when I heard three shots and a cry for help. I hurried forward at a venture, and came across you lying unconscious on the ground. I carried you into the house and did my best to bring you round. I am a medical man," he added a little self-consciously, "though I must confess that you are my first patient."

There was a strained, eager look in the old man's eyes as he gazed up into Hugh's face.

"When you hurried to me," he asked slowly, "did you see anything?"

"Why, no."

"Or hear anything?"

"No."

"You're sure of that?" the old man repeated. "You did not see or hear any living thing—*any living thing*, mind you!—coming from the direction of the spot where I was attacked?"

"Well" — Trenchard gave a slight smile as he spoke—"now I come to think of it, there *was* an animal of some sort—one of the moor ponies I suppose—which blundered past me in the mist. Probably it had been scared by your shots."

"Where did this—this moor pony pass you?"

The peculiar emphasis which the old man put on the words caused Hugh to glance at him sharply. Evidently there was a motive behind all this cross-questioning about a seemingly unimportant incident.

"It was in the little thicket at the bottom of the valley," he replied. "Of course I can not absolutely swear that it was a pony. You must realize that it was dark, misty, and there were bushes between us. I caught the merest glimpse as it raced past. But I can tell by your manner that you have an idea that it was a beast of another kind."

The man on the bed nodded grimly.

"You're right, sir! I *have* an idea—a very shrewd idea—that the thing you saw —the thing which attacked me—was a beast of a very different kind!"

"Indeed?" Hugh was interested, as well as mystified, by the strangeness of the old man's words and manners. "Doubtless you had a nearer view of the thing than I had, if it was within striking distance of you, and it would be more to the point if I were to ask *you* what kind of an animal it was."

Again the man on the bed shook his head.

"Young man," he said impressively, "if I were to answer that question truthfully you would certify me as a lunatic straight away. I would suggest that you went and saw for yourself the nature of that beast."

Hugh Trenchard uttered a short laugh.

"The thing, whatever it may have been, is a good many miles away by now."

"Maybe, but the Sign of the Beast remains!" The injured man raised himself on his elbow and clutched Trenchard's arm as he went on: "The ground is marshy in the valley—the trail of that animal ought to be easy to find. Take a lantern and one of my revolvers—they are all loaded—and go and examine those footprints. Then you will see for yourself the nature of the beast that passed you in the mist!"

WILD as the words were in themselves, they were uttered with such an air of deadly earnestness as to impress Trenchard in spite of his cooler reasoning. Without a word he rose to his feet and descended the stairs to the oak-panelled lower room.

It was the work of a very few moments to unhook the hurricane-lantern from its peg behind the door, light it, and thrust one of the revolvers into his pocket. Then, drawing back the massive bolts as quietly as possible, he stepped into the mist-shrouded night.

He was far from being unmindful that there was a certain amount of risk attached to his errand, but the old man's half-spoken hints had raised his curiosity to such a pitch as to make every other emotion subservient to it. All the same, he kept one hand on the butt of the weapon in his pocket, and the feel of the smooth, cold metal was very comforting when he had left the house well behind him.

He quickly found the spot, marked by an ominous red patch on the gravel, when he had found the wounded man, and from there he headed blindly for the thicket. The increasing softness of the ground seemed conclusive that he was making in the right direction, and presently he came upon the footprints that he had made when he had approached the house. It was a simple matter to follow these, and Trenchard pressed on.

"Yes—it was here that I changed directions when I saw the light from the open door," he muttered as he hurried forward, the lantern held close to the ground. "Here I made a detour to avoid that patch of brambles . . . and it was here, or somewhere about here, that the pony—heavens above!—what's this?"

Crossing his own trail was another line of deeply indented footprints, and at the sight of their queer, sinister outline the import of the wounded man's strange words became clear.

"My God!" The words burst from Trenchard involuntarily. "It is the trail of a cloven foot!"

Scarcely had the words left his lips when, from somewhere near at hand, there came a mocking laugh.

Trenchard's stooping figure straightened up like a released spring. He swung round in the direction of the voice, finger on trigger, every muscle taut.

"Who's there?" he called sharply. "Answer—or I fire!"

He paused for a breathless second, but the silence was broken only by the steady drip of moisture from the boughs overhead.

"Who are you?" he cried again, and this time the answer came:

"I am the Terror that walks by night—the uncrowned King of the Moor! Take heed how you trespass on my domain, lest you share the fate of Silas Marle—the meddling fool whom I have this night sent to his last account! Put up your gun, stranger, and go your way. No weapon forged by mortal man can avail against me——"

"We'll see about that!" Hugh muttered between his teeth.

As he spoke he threw up the hand which grasped the revolver and aimed in the direction of the voice. He pressed the trigger and a crashing report split the silence of the night. Before the echoes had died away the weapon was struck from his grasp, and almost at the same moment his lantern was shattered and extinguished.

But in that fleeting second he had seen the thing which had reached over his shoulder and disarmed him, and the sight benumbed his brain with a nameless horror.

For the thing that had descended with irresistible force on his wrist was a limb which terminated in a cloven hoof.

2

IF, TEN minutes previously, Hugh Trenchard had been asked if he was a believer in things supernatural, his answer would have been a contemptuous smile. It would have taken many hours of strong argument, backed by the sworn testimony of many eye-witnesses, to have convinced him that there are forces in nature which do not conform to the so-called "laws" of natural science. But in such matters a grain of real experience is worth a ton of theory. His conversion from skepticism to belief was instantaneous and complete.

One can not accuse a man of being faint-hearted if he steps clear of the track when an express train rushes past; his action is the working of a blind instinct of self-preservation from a thing which can not be withstood or overcome. Hugh Trenchard was no coward, yet when he found himself unarmed, encompassed by mist and darkness, and confronted by a mysterious being which, though speaking with the voice of a man, had the outward lineaments of a beast, his one thought and desire was to regain the shelter of the house. He turned and ran as he had never run before.

Reaching the garden gate, he paused and glanced behind him, listening. The only sound that reached his ears was the pounding of his own heart. Half ashamed of his panic flight, he completed the remainder of the distance at a walk, but he could not repress a long sigh of relief as he shot the bolts of the stout oak door. Now, at least, he could appreciate the motive that had led the solitary recluse to have the windows fitted with iron bars.

"Well?" There was a sardonic expression on the old man's face as he glanced round as Trenchard entered the bedroom. "There's no need to ask if you saw it—I heard the shot."

Hugh nodded as he seated himself.

"I saw its foot—and felt it, too," he returned grimly, rubbing his bruised wrist. "What in heaven's name is it? It spoke with a human voice, yet it seemed to have the form of a beast of some kind."

"You heard it speak?" cried the other eagerly. "What did it say?"

Hugh Trenchard shrugged.

"Oh, some melodramatic balderdash

about being King of the Moor, and warning me to quit unless I wanted to share the fate of Silas Marle. He was referring to you, I presume?"

"Yes," said the old man slowly. "He was referring to me."

"You must have tweaked his tail the wrong way—you couldn't have trodden on his corns!" Hugh observed, with a rather shaky laugh at his own attempt at humor. "This satyr, or centaur, or chimera—unnatural history is not my strong point, and, anyway, I didn't stop long enough to make any detailed observations that would assist in classifying the thing—it seems to have taken a mighty big dislike to you. It was evidently laboring under the delusion that it had what is vulgarly termed 'bumped you off'—a silly mistake for Old Nick to make, by the way!"

With a slow gesture of hopelessness, Silas Marle allowed his head to sink back on the pillows.

"It was no mistake," he said weakly. "I know I shall never recover."

The young doctor glanced sharply and apprehensively at his patient. In cases of shock, the human vitality is at low ebb, and a despondent state of mind might well turn the balance against recovery.

"By George! you'd better not let me hear you say that again!" he said in a tone of jocular severity. "You're my first patient, remember, and you've simply *got* to get well unless you want me to lose all faith in myself. Just you turn over and go to sleep. The sun will be up in an hour or so, and then I'll manage to find my way to the nearest house where I can send some one to fetch a doctor and to notify the police that a homicidal maniac is roaming around."

"I thought you said you were a doctor?" said Marle querulously.

"True," smiled Hugh, "but I'm not in the habit of carrying a stock of drugs about with me. And now I think you've talked quite enough—more than enough, in fact; so I'll leave you to yourself."

As he was about to quit the room the old man called him back.

"While you are about it, tell them to send a couple of doctors, and a lawyer. I want to make my will, and I don't want any question to arise about my present state of mind. I intend to put certain conditions in my will that will raise doubts as to my sanity, unless I get a certificate to the contrary."

"Oh, I'll certify your sanity all right," Hugh assured him, thinking it best to humor his queer whim. But Silas Marle shook his head.

"Your certificate won't do," he said shortly. "I want two independent opinions—you'll see why later on."

"Very well, you shall have them," Hugh replied, quite unruffled by this apparent distrust, and before the other could speak again he closed the door.

A GOOD map is an absolute necessity when tramping a district where moorland tracks and bridle paths form the only means of getting from one place to another, and the Ordnance Survey map carried by Hugh was both large-scaled and up-to-date. Spreading it on the table, he lighted his pipe and examined it closely.

Starting from the little market town where he had spent the previous night, he traced his day's journey, through the tiny hamlet of Worpledene and thence across the hilly moors. Fortunately he had a fairly accurate idea of his position when the mist had descended, and, as he had been careful to keep to the same path subsequently, it was only necessary for him to trace the dotted line which represented the footpath on the map to discover his present whereabouts.

"Ah, here we are," he muttered, pausing with the mouthpiece of his pipe hovering over a tiny black rectangle which indicated a house. "This is Silas Marle's house, but he doesn't appear to have any neighbors less than three miles off. Ah, what is this?" His eye was attracted by a house which, judging by the size of the square which indicated its position, must be of considerable importance. "'The Torside Private Sanatorium'—that should be the very place! There should not be any difficulty in finding a doctor there—perhaps two. A place like that will probably be connected to the nearest town by telephone; or at any rate they will have a car which they will allow me to use in view of the urgency of the case. Yes, unquestionably it would be best to make for there."

He rose to his feet and, drawing back the heavy window curtains, saw with satisfaction that the mist was lifting, while in the east a pale golden glow told that the sun was already above the horizon. He was in the act of snatching up his cap from the old-fashioned oak sideboard, where he had carelessly tossed it on entering, when his gaze fell upon one of the numerous revolvers. He hesitated a moment, then, pausing only to make sure that it was loaded in every chamber, thrust it into his hip pocket.

"May as well take it, seeing there's plenty to spare," he thought. "Judging by the number of his guns, any one would think Silas Marle was about to start a little war on his own!"

The morning promised to be hot and clear, though as yet the mist still lay like spectral pools in the valleys and depressions untouched by the rays of the rising sun. Locking the door of the house and pocketing the key, Hugh Trenchard stepped out briskly, and some thirty minutes later, on rounding a steep shoulder of the hills, he saw in the distance the Torside Private Sanatorium. The house itself stood in extensive, well-wooded grounds, and only the roof was visible above the high trees. Encircling the grounds was a very tall stone wall, armed with a triple row of iron spikes. A nearer approach showed that the sole means of entry was by a massive archway guarded by an iron gate, which proved to be locked.

Hugh gave a low whistle of surprize as he noted these facts.

"Some sanatorium!" he commented mentally. "Looks more like a prison!"

He stepped up to the gate and peered through the bars. A small gate-keeper's lodge stood just inside; a carriage drive, its edges overgrown with weeds, curved out of sight among the trees.

HUGH tugged at the bell-pull, and after a very long pause a man emerged from the lodge. He was a huge giant of a man, with harsh, craggy features that looked as though they had been hewn from tough wood with a blunt ax. Evidently he had been aroused from his slumbers, for his hair was ruffled and a full day's growth of stubble showed on his heavy blue jowl. He wore a kind of uniform of dark blue cloth and he was fastening the brass buttons of his tunic as he approached the gate.

"Wotcher want?" he demanded sourly, with an accent that had certainly not been acquired in the West Country.

"May I see the resident physician?—the case is urgent."

The man shook his head.

"This is a private institooshun. We only treats in-patients 'ere."

"But I don't want to consult him about my own health," Hugh answered, ignoring the man's surliness. "There has been a serious accident at a house three miles

off—a case of attempted murder, in fact —and it is of the utmost importance that certain drugs should be administered without delay."

"This 'ere is a private institoo-shun——"

"So you said before," Hugh interrupted sharply. "It is a private institution, of which you are, presumably, the man who attends to the gate. I have had some hospital experience, but this is the first time I've heard an attendant presuming to decide whether one of the doctors shall or shall not attend an urgent case."

"I 'as me orders," the man growled sullenly. "Nobody's allowed inside this gate without a written order."

Repressing his impatience at this stupid delay, Hugh produced his card-case.

"If that is so, will you be good enough to take my card to one of the doctors? If you will glance at it, you will see that I, also, am a medical man; and if I have any more incivility from you I shall not fail to report it to the proper quarter."

The man gave a grunt and took the slip of pasteboard. But instead of departing on his errand he stood twiddling it between his fingers. At this the last vestiges of Trenchard's patience vanished.

"Well?" There was an edge to his voice that made the other jump. "What are you waiting for?"

"Don't yer be in such a flamin' hurry, guv'nor. 'Ow can I take this to the doctor when he's not at home?"

The man's very looks betrayed the lie before it was uttered, but Hugh knew that to pursue the subject was useless.

"Very well, then. If that is the case, will you be good enough to allow me the use of your telephone for a few minutes, so that I can ring up another doctor?"

"Sorry, guv'nor, but we don't 'appen to have a phone."

Trenchard looked at the speaker in blank surprize. Then he shifted his gaze and glanced upward at the double wires which, joining others supported by the usual poles, stretched into the distance.

"I suppose those lines are to dry the washing on?" he asked with contemptuous sarcasm.

"The phone's out of order," snapped the man, and turned his back to terminate the interview.

"Hold on a minute," Hugh called after him. "I'll fix up your phone for you if you'll let me in. Can't you understand this may be a matter of life and death?"

The man swung round, his small eyes glinting viciously.

"I'll fix *you* if you don't take yourself off!" he shouted. "For two pins I'd come out there and teach you manners."

Trenchard grinned through the bars cheerfully and provokingly.

"I'm always open to take lessons—or give them," he said sweetly. "Won't you please step out here?"

The man's answer was a string of foul language.

"Just for a minute," Hugh pleaded. "No? Nothing doing in the teaching line? Well, as you won't come outside, I'll come in to you!"

He sprang upward as he spoke, and before the other realized his intention, drew himself up and dropped on the other side. Sheer surprize for a moment held the janitor dumb, then:

"Get out o' this—the way you came—or I'll bash you to a jelly!"

"Bash away!" Hugh invited with a grin.

As he spoke he placed himself in an awkward fighting attitude, and his opponent immediately fell into the trap. Sure of an easy victory over one so palpably ignorant of the rudiments of boxing, the man made a wild rush at Hugh, determined to finish him off with one tremen-

dous blow of his flint-hard fist. Hugh, on his part, was equally determined that the contest should be a swift one. Every wasted minute lessened the chances of recovery for the injured man he had left in the house on the moor. He was fighting for a human life; he knew it, and resolved to take no chances.

There was a grim smile hovering about the corners of his lips as he awaited the onslaught of the infuriated giant. At the last moment he side-stepped neatly—the great clenched fist shot past within an inch of his head. Before the man could recover, Hugh let him have a smashing left, delivered straight from the shoulder by one who knew how and where to hit —full on the point of his unshaven chin. It was a blow that had been the deciding factor of more than one inter-university middle-weight championship. The giant swayed for a split second, then crashed to the ground like an uprooted oak, and the fight was finished.

ALMOST before his adversary's body had reached the ground, Hugh was speeding up the drive toward the house. It lay farther back than he had thought, and the avenue of approach wound among the clumps of trees in a bewildering and—just then—exasperating manner. Actually the time could have been merely a matter of minutes, but it seemed ages before he came in sight of a stark-looking mansion, of a dreary, uninspired style of architecture that proclaimed its mid-Victorian origin as clearly as if the date were blazoned across its hideous frontage. Trenchard had seen many public hospitals, and a few private ones, but never had he seen an institution which wore such an air of desolation. Had it not been for the smoke which rose from the chimneys he would have thought the place derelict, untenanted; for every visible window was closely shuttered and a deep, unbroken silence prevailed.

"Evidently they don't believe in open-air treatment at *this* place!" the young doctor thought as he approached the front door and rang the bell. As he waited for an answer, his eyes travelled along the double tier of shuttered windows, his mind dimly wondering what kind of a medical man would keep his patients in semi-darkness; for the only daylight that could enter was that which could find its way through a small diamond-shaped aperture cut in the center of each shutter.

For a full minute he waited thus, then raised his hand to ring again; but his arm dropped to his side and he remained staring in amazement at what he saw.

Through the nearest diamond-shaped aperture, a single gleaming eye was regarding him fixedly. The hole was so small that he could only distinguish the eye and a portion of the face, but the little that he saw was sufficient to turn his blood to ice. In the faint shadow cast by the shutter, *the eye was shining with a greenish light!*

Hugh Trenchard's studies had taught him enough comparative anatomy for him to know that it is only the eyes of animals that possess the peculiar glistening layer known as the *tapetum lucidum;* yet the section of face immediately surrounding the eye was grotesquely human. Trenchard was just on the point of shifting his position to get a nearer view, when the face was withdrawn with a jerky abruptness which suggested that the thing—whatever it might have been—had been suddenly and forcibly pulled away from the window. At the same moment a shrill, animal-like cry came faintly from within, and——

"Good morning, sir," said a smooth voice from the doorway. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Turning with a start, Hugh found himself face to face with a figure which, to one unversed in the procedure of the operating-theater, might have appeared weird and unearthly.

The man was dressed from head to foot in white; a white cap covered his hair, and his features were invisible beneath the veil of white gauze which wound round the lower portion of his face so that the eyes alone were visible, giving him the aspect of an animated corpse.

The man in white noted the start of surprize, for there was a hint of amusement in his voice as he went on:

"I must apologize if my somewhat unusual attire has scared you——"

"Scared nothing!" Hugh broke in, stung by the man's manner. "I've worn that rig scores of times."

"Ah, indeed?" A look of speculative interest came into the watching eyes. "And may I again inquire what brings a brother practitioner to my door?"

He listened in silence while Hugh hurriedly explained what had happened, not omitting his encounter with the man at the gate. At the conclusion the man in white made a gesture of annoyance.

"Tut, tut—it is really to be regretted that Dawker tried to keep you out. He is an excellent servant, but stupid—ah, yes—hopelessly stupid. It is true that he has strict orders to admit no strangers, but undoubtedly he exceeded them in not making allowances in such an exceptional case. Needless to say, my telephone is entirely at your disposal. I hope you will excuse my not removing this antiseptic mask," he went on, indicating his gauze-swathed features. "When you arrived I was on the point of performing a—ah—a little operation. Be pleased to enter, Doctor Trenchard."

The unknown stood aside deferentially as Hugh stepped across the threshold. As the door closed, there followed the unmistakable click of automatic bolts, and, with a sudden foreboding of hovering peril, he realized that he was a prisoner in the house of mystery.

3

HUGH TRENCHARD rather prided himself on the soundness of his nerves, yet his first impulse was to turn on his strange guide and force him, at the point of his revolver if milder methods failed, to open the door. But he quickly saw the foolishness of revealing his suspicions at this stage, and he felt that it would be worse than foolish to turn tail after he had gone to so much trouble to gain an entry. Besides, there was the injured man to be considered. If he could but get a phone call through to the nearest town, he was quite content to rely on his quick wits and well-trained muscles to make his escape from this sinister "sanatorium."

He had not the slightest doubt that the house hid some mystery which, in more senses than one, shunned the light of day. The high walls, the evil-faced gatekeeper, the surgeon with the masked face, the closely shuttered windows — each detail no doubt easily explainable by itself, but taken together they formed a danger signal which it would be madness to ignore.

All this passed through Hugh's mind as he was being conducted down a long corridor which, although it was broad day outside, was illuminated by electric globes set at intervals on the walls.

"You must use a lot of current," he observed, intending thus to lead up to the subject of the darkened rooms. But his guide saved him the trouble.

"Ah, yes. Exactly." For the first time Hugh noticed a faint foreign intonation in his voice. "But we have—how do you

English express it?—ah yes, we have plenty of current to burn. We have our own generating plant, and it comes in useful for many purposes besides illumination." The eyes which looked out from the blank, gauze-swathed face flashed a keen glance at Hugh as the man went on: "Of course you noticed that I keep the windows shuttered, and doubtless, as a medical man, you thought it rather peculiar, eh?"

"It's certainly a bit different from the usual hospital custom," Hugh admitted cautiously, "but I presume you have your reasons?"

A soft, almost purring laugh issued from the veiling white gauze.

"Exactly—I have my reasons. Some of my patients—many of them, in fact—are ophthalmic cases, where, as you will readily understand, an excess of light may be most injurious. I find it more convenient to exclude the daylight altogether, so as to be able to regulate the degree of illumination at will, and to adapt it to the needs of each particular case."

"Of course," assented Hugh, though he was not deceived for a minute by this glib explanation. "And do you find the results satisfactory?"

Although he had tried to make his voice assume the natural tone in which one medical man might express an interest in another's work, he could not altogether divest it of a faint ring of amused sarcasm. Again the masked man turned and glanced at him.

"Ah, yes," he said very softly. "The results are, as you say, quite satisfactory, and some of them are unique. Maybe I shall be able to afford you personal proof of my capabilities in my own line."

"I shall be delighted," Hugh murmured conventionally. Try as he might, he could not help an icy shiver passing down his spine at the equivocal offer.

Presently their progress was barred by a small white-painted door, which, from the absence of the usual panels, Hugh assumed to be of iron. The self-styled ophthalmic surgeon unlocked it with a key which he carried, with many others, on a slender steel chain.

"After you, Doctor Trenchard," he said, politely standing aside.

"You keep things well locked up here," the young doctor could not help remarking as he stepped through.

"Naturally," was the suave reply. "The phone is in my dispensary, where there are dangerous drugs—'Safe bind, safe find,' as your proverb runs."

"That's exactly what my dear old granny used to say," said Hugh gravely. "Proverbs and nursery rimes were her weakness, bless her kind heart! Her favorite was 'Will you walk into my parlor, said the Spider to the Fly;' but in my young days I could never help wondering how the rime would have ended if the innocent little Fly had turned out to be a nasty Wasp."

The other's answering laugh sounded a trifle forced.

"Ha, ha, ha! How you Britishers love your leetle joke!"

"Don't we just!" Trenchard's genial grin seemed to stop short of his steady, watchful eyes. "But *practical* jokes are considered bad form nowadays. Where's that telephone?" he added with a quick change of tone. Again his ear had caught the click of a hidden bolt in the door they had just passed through.

"Patience, my friend. The telephone is here—right by my operating-room."

The man in white threw open a door as he spoke, and this time he did not invite his guest to precede him. With every muscle braced for quick action, Hugh followed; a second later he could have laughed at his grim anticipations.

The room in which he found himself might have appeared extraordinary to a layman, but to one familiar with morphological museums it presented no unusual features. Its general arrangement was that of a small library, but instead of volumes, the shelves were packed with glass jars, each filled with colorless spirit in which floated bleached and horrible-looking anatomical specimens. But the thing which interested Hugh most at that moment was the telephone which stood on the table. Eagerly he advanced to the instrument, but before lifting the receiver he turned to the man in white with a sudden question:

"Might I know the name of the institution from which I am speaking?"

"Tell them that you are at the Torside Private Sanatorium."

"Speaking by the courtesy of——" Hugh Trenchard paused interrogatively. The man's strange reticence made him more curious than ever to learn his name.

"The name of Doctor Lucien Felger may not be unknown to you?" he asked a trifle pompously.

It was an indirect mode of answering his query, but Hugh merely shook his head.

"I hope you'll forgive my ignorance, but it's quite unknown to me. Do you happen to be registered?"

"Not in this country," was the swift answer. "I was graduated at Vienna. Of course, in order to conform with your excellent laws, I can not appear as the head of this establishment—that position is held by Doctor Nathaniel Mutley."

"Oh, I know *him* all right, at least by reputation." Hugh thought it was not policy to add that the reputation in question was none too savory, the doctor having very narrowly escaped having his name struck off the register of the General Medical Council for infamous professional conduct. The fact that such a man occupied an important post served to bring back Hugh's suspicions with redoubled force. Without further words he lifted the receiver and called the Exford exchange.

"Put me through to the local police station."

Doctor Felger uttered a low laugh.

"Is it really necessary to trouble the police?"

"I think it is," Hugh answered curtly. "A man has been savagely attacked——"

"Granted—but by what?" There was a note of sardonic humor in Felger's voice as he put the question. "It has doubtless escaped your memory that Exmoor is famous for its herds of wild deer, and it is a well-known fact that the stags are apt to become very savage and dangerous to approach at certain seasons of the year. It is scarcely necessary to remind a scientific man like yourself that the red deer belongs to the *Ruminantia* division of the widespread natural order of *Ungulata*, or hoofed animals. They are artiodactyl mammals — in non-scientific language, 'cloven-footed'—and when they are enraged they are in the habit of using their hoofs as well as their antlers. Do you not think it feasible that your friend—his name escapes me for the moment—owes his injuries to some wandering stag which he encountered in the mist?"

Hugh shook his head at this specious explanation.

"You forgot that I heard some one boast, in so many words, that he had killed Silas Marle, and threaten me with the same fate."

"Ah, exactly." Felger's slow shrug was an expressive indication of disbelief. "It is curious how one's perceptions can be deceived in moments of strain and excitement. Tell me frankly, Doctor Trenchard, if one of your patients were to

tell you the same extraordinary tale, what would *you* think?"

"I should hand the case over to a mental specialist. But please excuse me for a few moments. I've got my connection." He turned and spoke into the receiver.

"Is that the Exford police station?"

"Yes — sergeant in charge speaking. What's the trouble, sir?" came the answer, very clear and distinct.

"Attempted murder," and Hugh hurriedly gave him the particulars.

"Very well, sir," said the voice when he had finished. "I will send a constable along in the car at once. *Two* doctors, I think you said? And a solicitor? Good! I'll give orders that they are to call at the Torside Sanatorium to pick you up."

"Thank you. I will wait here for you. Good-bye."

Trenchard hung up the receiver and turned to the other man.

"That station-sergeant at Exford appears to be a smart man," Hugh remarked. "He lost no time in getting busy on the case—seemed to take it almost as a matter of course, judging by the few questions that he asked. Apparently he's a Londoner, for he did not speak with the accent of a West-Countryman. He said that the police car would pick me up here; so I fear I must trespass on your hospitality till it arrives."

Doctor Felger bowed.

"My little institution is honored by the presence of so astute a member of the medical profession," he declared fulsomely. "Would you care to see my operating-room? It will serve to pass the time. You would? Excellent! Pray excuse me while I see that everything is in order."

With another bow, Doctor Lucien Felger quitted the room and closed the door. A good ten minutes elapsed before he reappeared and beckoned to Hugh.

"This way, Doctor Trenchard."

Glancing at him, Hugh saw that he now wore clamped to his forehead a small but powerful portable electric lamp, such as surgeons are accustomed to use to shed light on the patient while performing delicate operations. It was quite an ordinary article of hospital equipment; yet for some reason the fact that Felger was wearing it outside the operating-room filled his mind with vague misgivings. Outwardly nonchalant, but in reality alert and watchful, he followed his host down the corridor.

"HERE we are."

As he spoke, Felger ushered him into a bare, spotlessly white room whose only furnishings were a metal operating-table, another, bearing numerous bright instruments and a sterilizing-bath, and a fixed hand-basin surmounted by two silver taps.

Felger crossed to the smaller table, took up a phial containing some clear, colorless liquid, and looked at it thoughtfully.

"I think I mentioned that I was about to perform a little operation? It seems that you have timed your arrival—your entirely unsolicited arrival—at a very opportune moment, Doctor Hugh Trenchard. I promised to show you a little of my surgical skill, and so——"

Without warning the whole of the lights were suddenly extinguished, leaving the place in a darkness utter and impenetrable. Felger gave a mutter of annoyance.

"Tut, tut! It's really too bad that the generating-plant has chosen this moment to break down. However——"

There was the click of a turned switch and the lamp on his forehead flamed into brilliance. Its rays struck full into Hugh's eyes, half blinding him and rendering everything invisible save that dazzling

white glow. At the same moment his nostrils caught a whiff of an odor which is never forgotten by those who have experienced it—the sweetly volatile reek of chloroform.

"I should advise you to keep the stopper in that phial, doctor," Hugh spoke quietly, but there was an edge to his voice like chilled steel. "I might act funny if that stuff gets to my head. I might, for instance, let off the pistol I've got in my pocket, and somebody might get hurt!"

"A loaded pistol?" remonstrated Felger's voice from the darkness. "Dear me! how foolish of you to carry such a dangerous thing about with you!"

Hugh smiled grimly.

"Silly of me, isn't it? But there! I'm always doing silly things. For instance, I had a perfectly crazy idea that the man who answered my phone call was not the police-sergeant at Exford, but the estimable Dawker, speaking from the lodge at the gate of this house. Foolish of me, of course—but I've a good memory for voices and I recognized his Cockney twang the moment he began speaking. To make sure, however, I put through another call while you were out of the room, and it may save you some trouble—to say nothing of a possible stretch of penal servitude, or something worse—if I inform you that my second call got through to the police. They should be here at any minute now, and if I'm not forthcoming, there'll be some questions asked which will take you the rest of your life to answer. Have you got that, my dear Professor Felger—of Vienna? Then switch on the lights and open that door, or I shall be under the painful necessity of performing a little operation on you—without anesthetics!"

The beam of light waggled to and fro as Felger shook his head reprovingly.

"Really, sir, your wild words fill me with amazement! Penal servitude? Police? I am absolutely at a loss for words in which to express my regret at having made myself so grossly misunderstood. If I find that my servant has played a little innocent practical joke on you by answering the call himself, he shall most certainly be severely reprimanded——"

The lights came on again as he spoke. Hugh uttered a short laugh.

"Your electrician must be a thought-reader—or was it a secret foot-switch that worked the oracle? No, don't speak—another day will do for explanations," he jerked out crisply. "Forward slow march, the way we came in, is the order of the day. This trigger seems to have a mighty light pull; so if you have any more practical jokers like friend Dawker on the premises, it'll be healthier for you if they bottle up their humor till I'm outside." He bowed toward the door with the same elaborate gesture which the other had used in entering. "After *you*, Doctor Lucien Felger!"

Slowly and in silence, Hugh carefully keeping step with the man in front, the two traversed the echoing corridors. As Felger unlocked the outer door he turned to Hugh with a pleasant laugh.

"Good day, doctor. I am charmed to have made your acquaintance. But for the life of me I can not understand why you have suddenly become so mistrustful of me. Surely it is unnecessary for me to repeat that I was only about to demonstrate to you a minor operation on one of my patients?"

"Quite unnecessary," Hugh agreed with emphasis. As he pocketed his revolver there came the sound of prolonged honking from the direction of the gate. "That'll be the real police-sergeant from Exford—I wonder if he'll be grateful to your near-clever gatekeeper for deputiz-

ing for him? *Au revoir,* professor. I have a feeling in my bones that we'll meet again."

"Assuredly we will—and very soon!"

The hissing vehemence with which the words burst out revealed for the first time the seething volcano of baffled hate which lay beneath the suave urbanity of Professor Lucien Felger.

4

"IT'S a queer story you've just told me, Mr. Trenchard, and, frankly, I shouldn't feel inclined to place much credence in it if it was not for the fact that something very similar happened here just over a year ago."

Hugh and Sergeant Jopling, of the Somerset County constabulary, were seated in the dining-room of Marle's house when the latter volunteered this rather startling piece of information. A cheerful fire of logs crackled in the wide grate; the lamp was lit and the heavy curtains drawn across the diamond-paned windows. Altogether the room looked much more cheerful than Hugh had thought possible when he had first seen it through the hovering wreaths of mist. Much had happened since their arrival about midday. The two local doctors had examined the injured man, and, although they expressed the opinion, privately, that he was in a very serious condition, they had no hesitation in signing the document which the solicitor drew up, certifying his complete sanity. In order to place the matter beyond dispute, they consented to act as the two necessary witnesses to the will itself. This was a short document, and a very few minutes sufficed for the legal gentleman to draw it up; whereupon he and one of the doctors had taken their departure, leaving Silas Marle in the care of the other. For some reason that Hugh was unable to fathom, the old man stoutly refused to allow him to undertake his case. It was perhaps only natural that the young doctor should feel slightly piqued at this implied lack of confidence in his professional ability; it was not until some time afterward that he divined the motive which lay behind this almost churlish refusal.

It came as something of a shock to Hugh to learn that the attack on the old man had been preceded by a similar occurrence. He eagerly pressed Sergeant Jopling for details.

"Yes, sir, very queer it was," said that worthy officer. "I'm rather surprized that Mr. Marle didn't tell you himself, seeing how he's——" He stopped in the middle of a sentence and eyed Hugh in a curious manner as he concluded rather hastily: "I meant to say, seeing that you're so friendly."

Trenchard could not help wondering what the sergeant had been about to say at first; but he merely smiled as he shook his head.

"You must remember that Mr. Marle was badly hurt when I first saw him, and he was not in a condition to say much."

Sergeant Jopling stroked his drooping mustache thoughtfully.

"Just so, sir, just so," he agreed. "It were very lucky for him that you happened along just when you did. And—if I may make so bold to say so—it were very lucky for *you,* sir, that the poor man wasn't killed outright."

The young man stared at him in unaffected amazement, and his anger was not less than his surprize.

"Now what exactly do you mean by that?" he asked at length.

The sergeant had a disconcerting habit of gazing up at the ceiling and speaking as though he were addressing some unseen person on the next floor. He did so now as he went on very deliberately.

"I mean, sir, seeing that you were the only person near at the time, and as we only had your unsupported word for what happened, some people—I said *some* people, mind you—might have got the notion into their heads that you had something to do with his injuries, and if there had been a less intelligent officer in charge of the case you might have been charged with killing him—provided, naturally, that he had been killed. Or, conversely, as one may say, with doing him grievous bodily harm if so-be-it he was only injured — as the matter stands at present."

Trenchard's hearty laugh made the sergeant's eyes leave their contemplation of the age-blackened rafters and turn on him.

"I suppose you mean that for a roundabout hint that you suspect *me?*" he said, still laughing. "Why, the thing is absurd!"

"Oh, some folks might not think it so absurd. I've taken Marle's depositions, and he can not swear as to who actually struck him down—which is not surprizin' seeing that it was dark and misty at the time. And—if you'll pardon me saying so, sir—that yarn of yours about a cloven-footed devil would sound a bit thin when told to a hard-headed—I mean a clear-headed British jury."

In spite of himself, Hugh began to lose his temper.

"You can have a look at the footprints, if you like," he retorted stiffly. "Doubtless they're still there."

"I've had a look at 'em," Jopling observed complacently. "What's more, I had the harborer of the stag-hounds—the man whose duty it is to track and locate a stag before the hounds are brought out—I had him up here and asked his opinion of those hoofprints. Without a moment's hesitation he said the trail was the slot of an old stag—a 'warrantable stag' as they call it hereabouts, meaning one fit for hunting."

"An old stag?" Hugh repeated. "How old does a stag have to be before he's described thus?"

Jopling stuck his thumbs through his leather belt and leant back in his chair, nothing loth to display his knowledge of the ancient art of venery.

"Well, it's like this, sir. They don't talk of the ages of deer the same as they do of, say, horses—a two-year-old, or a three-year-old and so forth. A stag is spoken of by his 'points;' that is, the number of points, or tines, that he carries on his antlers. A stag under a year old has no horns at all; at four years the brow antlers begin to grow. You may not be aware that stags shed their antlers every year, and grow new ones in the spring, and as the animal grows older new points are added—an old stag might carry as many as fifteen. Nick Froude, the harborer, can tell the age of a stag by looking at its trail better nor you can tell the age of a female by looking at her face—'specially nowadays since they've taken to having their faces lifted every now and again. In Nick's opinion, the stag that left that slot down in the combe yonder was the very same beast that attacked and killed old Marle's missus just over a year gone."

Hugh Trenchard started as he grasped the full meaning of the policeman's words.

"So Marle's wife was murdered by that——" He paused, then added, to avoid further argument—"that old stag? Did you have charge of the case?"

A faint smile spread over Jopling's rubicund features.

"Well, you could hardly call it a 'case,' sir, seeing as how it was the act of a brute beast. The matter was reported to me,

but all I could do was to notify the verderers that a dangerous beast was at large. They put the hounds on its trail, and a pretty dance he led them. Cunning?—I tell you that old stag was as cunning as Satan himself! He seemed to know that what he'd done would bring the hounds after him, and the tricks and dodges by which he covered his trail showed an understanding that was almost human. There was not a stream that he didn't wade along for a few hundred yards; he seemed to know that the scent don't lie over water. Finally he took to a newly tarred road, not far from the village of Withypool, of all places, and there, of course, the hounds were at fault. They put some of the 'tufters'—the oldest, most experienced hounds—on each side of the moorland which bordered the road, and let them range free to see if they could pick up the scent again. But the creature must have gone clean through the main street of the village and out the other side, and so got clear away."

"Extraordinary thing for an animal to do which is usually regarded as being extremely shy of human beings," Hugh commented dryly.

"Just so, sir. Usually they make for the high forest lands round about Dure Down, or Dunkery Beacon. It's my belief that the creature was mad."

A MAD stag? Trenchard frowned. There was one thing which he could not reconcile with such a simple theory—the voice he had heard that night. Whatever the malign thing was that had struck his pistol from his grasp, it was certainly not a demented deer! But the sergeant's attitude of scoffing disbelief did not encourage him to voice his doubts.

"I presume you'll make use of the staghounds on this occasion?" he contented himself with asking.

"Unfortunately there'll be some delay in putting them on the scent." Jopling shook his head ruefully. "There's been an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease at a dairy farm near the kennels, and the dogs have been shifted to other quarters some distance away. The earliest they can be here is tomorrow morning. The scent will be rather cold by then, but we must hope for the best—and no rain in the night."

But the worthy Jopling's hopes in this respect were doomed to be disappointed. Toward sundown a drizzle set in which rapidly increased into a steady downpour. Hugh listened to it lashing against the leaded casements as he sat before the fire in the library, with his pipe and an ancient-looking, calf-bound volume which he had taken almost at random from the shelves. He was in the middle of deciphering a passage of the quaint, black-letter print when the door opened and Doctor Brewster, the local practictioner who had offered to remain with the injured man, appeared. Hugh laid his book face upward on the table and rose to greet the newcomer.

"Well, how's your patient this evening?" he asked.

Ronald Brewster was considerably older than Hugh. The two men had met while "walking" the same London hospital, and a close friendship had sprung up between them. He was a hefty-looking specimen of manhood, with hair of a shade that it would be gross flattery to call "auburn," and a face that was remarkable more for its habitual expression of irrepressible good-humor than its beauty. He was a noted Rugby player, strong as a horse and, as Hugh well knew by his encounter with him in the boxing-ring—stubborn as a mule where physical endurance was concerned. Taken altogether, Hugh could not have picked on a more

useful ally in a quest which was more than likely to have a spice of danger in it.

"He's going on fine," he said in answer to his chum's question. "It was touch and go a little while back, but I'll stake my professional reputation——"

"The world-wide reputation you have gained by a year's practise in a one-horse country town," laughed Hugh.

"——that I'll pull him through."

"Well, Ronnie," said Hugh, with a bow of mock gravity, "if the poor man is really lying at Death's door, I know of nobody more likely to pull him through than yourself!"

Brewster had caught up the nearest cushion with the intention of hurling it at the head of his libelous fellow-medico, when his eyes fell on the book on the table. He dropped the intended missile and began to turn the age-yellowed pages.

"Hullo, what's this?" he said with a contemptuous grimace, as he read the title-page. *"Ye Boke of Sorcerie, Straunge Demons and Unnatural Monstres.* I must say I like your notion of a little light literature! Are you swotting for a professorship in the Black Art?"

"Oh, no," disclaimed the other. "I'm a mere dabbler as yet. This Silas Marle seems to be a queer bird; his bookcase is simply crammed with ancient tomes which deal with occult subjects. Some of the learned authors are delightfully humorous—though unconsciously so. Just listen to this:"

He rapidly turned the leaves until he found the place where he had left off, then read aloud:

" 'But there be Monstres (that ys to saye Creatures whyche conforme nott to ye Manner of their Kynde) broughte forth by ye naturall impure fluxes and humours in ye Air, and in nowise ye Worke of Arte Magike ne Dyvellysshe. Of yse sorte be ye Sheep with twain Heads, Swine with Five Leggs, and Twin Children of ye Human Kynde whose Bodyes be Joyned ye one to ye other. When suche appear (ye whyche Godde forbydde) they do prestige Turmoil and Warre, Greate Floodes, Grevious Drought, Pests, and Famynes, and divers Grevious Calamitityous Evyls——' "

"By Jove! the fellow is quite an antediluvian Old Moore!" ejaculated Ronnie at this point.

"Shut up, and listen. *'But there be divers Monstrous Thynges ye whyche walke ye Earthe (maugre seen by Fewe, Godde be thanked) broughte forth by Enchantementes and Sorceryes. Yse be yclept Ye Harpye, ye whyche be half-maidens, half-byrds of foule and omnivorous hunger, the rauversshers of All who dysappeare Without Trayce. And there be Ye Wyvern, whose fore parte be as a Dragone and hynder parte that of a Serpente (if caughte upon Sainte Swythen his daye it breatheth Fyre for a full Yeare)——' "*

"Very useful in ye winter time, gadzooks!" put in the irrepressible Ronnie.

" 'And there be Ye Flitter-Gibbet, ye whyche devoureth ye Fatt of Hanged Maulefactors; and Ye Mandragora, ye whyche screameth lyke a Woman when dragged from ye Earthe. And there be Chimera——' "

"Most decidedly there be!" Ronnie agreed heartily. "Does the old liar give the natural history of Ye Jabberwock or Ye Snark?"

"Shut up!—I'm just coming to the really interesting part!"

"Thank heaven for that!" was Ronnie's pious rejoinder.

" 'But of alle yse Thynges are as naught beside ye Foule and Namelesse Thynge whyche, fearsome beyonde measure, haunteth ye Desolate Moore of ye Auncient Kyngdome of Wessex. Of its

aspect no man hath lyved to telle. It slaythe wythe Arte and Cunnynge beyonde very belief, nathless it leaveth ye Cloven Trayle of its Devyl's Foot wheresoever it walketh. Onlye by thys Sygne may it be knowne, for ye outer aspect (by ye whyche it cajoles and deceives its Victyms) is evere changefulle. There be tymes when it cometh in the guise of a Holye Clerke; anon it appeareth as a Fair Knight bedight in costlye velvet and whyte Samyte, or trussed in harness cap-à-piè. Anon (as seemyth best fytted to lure its Victym to hys Doom) it cometh in the guise of a Maiden, rauvishing to the eye and fair withal, who knocketh on ye Casement, beseechynge entry. But woe to hym that——'"

He read no further. Above the sough of the wind and swish of the driving rain there came a light tap on the window, and the sound of a girl's voice, low and sweet as the note of a fairy flute.

"Please may I come in?" it said.

5

THE two men sat rigid and motionless, staring at each other across the printed page, and in that breathless moment each seemed to read in the other's eyes a feeling deeper than mere surprize.

Both were of the age when Hamlet's famous and oft-quoted admonition to Horatio has least appeal. The skepticism which belongs to youth, backed by a course of arduous studies whose fundamental basis was the ruthless logic of natural cause and effect, had rendered each far from willing to concede that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Yet, in spite of all this, each sat as though he had been turned to stone by the few words uttered by that sweet, plaintive voice.

Ronnie was the first to recover. He sprang to his feet, uttering a kind of shamefaced laugh.

"I vote we let the lady in," he cried. "If the rest of her is in keeping with her voice, she ought to be a very desirable addition to our party."

Hugh rose from his seat more slowly.

"I think we'd better hold a parley through the window first."

"Scared of bogles?" queried Ronnie with a laugh.

Hugh did not answer immediately. Truth to tell, although he would have smiled at them amid other surroundings, the words of the ancient necromancer had affected him more deeply than he had at first realized. As he had read the quaint, measured phrases aloud, to the accompaniment of the wild, mournful booming of the wind in the wide chimney; with the flickering flame of the lamp sending fantastic shadows dancing on the oak-panelled walls, he had infused into the words a sincerity which almost convinced him of their truth. In spite of his cooler reasoning, he found himself wondering if it were indeed blind chance that had ordained that the soft, seductive voice should make itself heard at the very moment he was describing the attributes of the nameless terror which haunted the moor.

"Coming to let the poor girl in?"

The voice of Ronnie snapped the spell which seemed to bind Hugh. He shook himself like a man suddenly awakened from sleep.

"Of course," he said quickly. "But there's no harm in being a bit cautious. We haven't solved the mystery of the attack on Silas Marle yet, remember, and there may be even more dangerous things than spooks hovering around."

He slipped back the ponderous bolts and opened the door a little way. For a moment the rush of wind-driven sleet

almost blinded him; he sensed rather than actually saw the vague form which advanced, with a queer, shambling gait, toward him.

"Help me!—my strength is spent!"

The words were a mere murmur, urgent and imploring. Without pausing to put into operation his carefully thought-out precautions, Hugh flung wide the door and caught the swaying figure in his arms. With a sudden tingling of his spine, he realized that he was clutching something that felt like the furry covering of some beast! In spite of himself he felt a shudder pass through his body as he stood hesitating in the doorway. The impatient voice of his chum roused him with a jerk.

"What are you standing there for, gaping like a stranded codfish?" Ronnie cried. "Have you never seen a girl in a fur coat before? Carry her in here"—he threw open the door of the living-room —"and look sharp about it. The poor girl seems half dead with cold and exposure."

A shaft of lamplight from the open door convinced Hugh that his burden was indeed of the human species, though little of the face was visible between the wide, upturned collar of the coat and the limply drooping brim of the rain-drenched hat. It was only when he had deposited her in the large, leather-covered armchair in front of the fire, and removed the hat and coat, that he glimpsed the features of the nocturnal visitor. As he did so, an involuntary exclamation of admiration escaped his lips.

The girl was more than pretty: her exquisite beauty, pale and dishevelled though she was, appeared to have brought a new and wonderful radiance into that somber room. Her very pallor accentuated rather than marred the flawless profile of her face. Her hair, in spite of its dampness, shimmered like a mass of spun gold in the dim rays of the lamp, with here and there a diamond-like sparkle when the light caught a lingering raindrop. Beneath her fur coat she wore what appeared to be an evening frock of silvery gauze, which, although torn in one place at the hem of the skirt, and showing more than one mud-splash, invested her slim figure with such a pale, ethereal radiance that she might have been a pixy that had stolen in from the storm-swept moor. Hugh stared and stared at her as though anxious to imprint her image on his brain before she vanished from his sight, and every moment that he looked he became more and more convinced that she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen.

Meanwhile the impetuous Ronnie had constituted himself physician-in-charge.

"Humph!" he remarked, as he lifted the slender wrist and felt her pulse. "This is a case which calls for a little stimulant. Put some more logs on the fire while I hunt out the brandy."

THE instant the door had closed behind his chum, Hugh saw a sudden change come over the hitherto expressionless face. The long-fringed eyelids abruptly opened, revealing eyes of clearest blue. But it was their peculiar expression rather than their beauty that made Hugh Trenchard stop with a log held in mid-air. They had in them nothing of that bewildered look which is natural to one recovering from a swoon; instead, he thought he could detect in their depths the wary, calculating look of one who had anxiously awaited the moment when they would be alone. He could have staked his life that the girl had been shamming unconsciousness, and the question came hammering at his brain: "Why?"

But he was not left long in doubt as to

the answer. With a quick, sinuous movement, the unknown girl sat upright, at the same time slipping her hand into the pocket of her coat and pulling out a long envelope.

"Quick!" she whispered, holding it toward him. "Take this, and keep it till I claim it again. Let no one know you have it in your possession—no one, you understand?—and guard it as you would your life. It contains something which means more than life to me. You promise?"

Instinctively Hugh's hand closed on the packet; as he transferred it to his pocket he glimpsed a large red seal impressed with what seemed to be a heraldic crest.

"I promise," he said softly. It seemed as if the words came from his lips without conscious thought.

"If circumstances should arise which prevent me claiming it within a month, deliver it to the person to whom it is addressed," the girl went on, still speaking scarcely above her breath. "Promise on your honor not to read that address until the month is up."

"I promise," repeated Hugh; then he added swiftly, "My friend—the man who just left us — is an excellent fellow. Won't you let me confide in him? You couldn't have a better pal if there's likely to be trouble brewing——"

Her red lips curved in a bitter smile as she interrupted:

"Rest assured there'll be trouble enough! But tell no one what I have given you — not even your staunchest friend. There are some secrets which, here on the moor, one must not whisper even to oneself, and——"

"But——"

"Hush!"

Her quick ears must have caught the faint sound of Ronnie's returning footsteps, for a moment later he re-entered the room with a decanter and tumbler.

"No need to trouble, old chap——" Hugh began, only to curse himself for a thoughtless fool. For at the moment of his friend's entry the girl had sunk back on the cushions, her eyes closed, her figure limp and apparently unconscious. Luckily Ronnie was too preoccupied to notice his words. He quickly poured out some neat spirit and held the glass to the girl's parted lips.

A feeling of amazement, not entirely untinged with uneasiness, took possession of Hugh as he noted the perfect artistry with which she simulated a gradual return to consciousness. Who, he asked himself, was this accomplished actress who had drifted in without warning from the bleak and desolate moor? That she was quite capable of fooling his friend he had just had ocular proof: what if he too were being fooled?

"That's better," Ronnie said encouragingly, as the girl sat up weakly, her half-veiled eyes looking about the room with an expression much different from her former keen regard. "You'll soon be all right again. Would you like to rest? We have a spare bedroom where you'll be quite comfortable until morning. Sergeant Jopling is coming over first thing, and I'm sure he'll be willing to give you a lift as far as Exford, or wherever you wish to get to."

Hugh was watching the girl closely, and he could have sworn a sudden light of uneasiness illuminated the girl's eyes at the mention of the police officer. Strive as he would, he could not rid his mind of the impression that it was something more than mere chance that had brought her to the house.

"Oh, I shall be quite all right sitting by this nice fire," she answered, with a pretty little gesture of protest. "I should

never forgive myself if my uninvited visit were to deprive either you or Doctor Trenchard of a bed."

Hugh started as though he had been stung. From the girl's words, artless and spontaneous though they seemed, two ugly facts stood out like sinister, jagged rocks rearing their heads above the surface of a smiling sea. She knew his name, in spite of the fact that he was a mere chance visitor to the district, and she was acquainted with the interior of the house sufficiently well to know that every bed would be occupied that night! Even the unobservant Ronnie was struck by the first fact.

"What! are you two already acquainted?" he cried with a laugh. "And that sly dog never let on that he knew you—actually tried to make out that he thought you were a furry banshee or something!"

The girl turned her eyes in Hugh's direction and there was a warning gleam lurking in their blue depths.

"We met in town," she smiled. "Surely you haven't forgotten Joan Endean?"

"Of course," assented Hugh, dutifully taking up the cue which was so adroitly given him. "I knew your face was familiar, although your name eluded me. As some excuse for my lapse of memory, you must realize it is some time since last we met."

She smiled again at the dry tone in which he spoke.

"You are already forgiven—if there is anything to forgive—in failing to remember an unimportant person like myself," she said, lifting her shoulders in a careless shrug. "Really it is I who ought to be pleading forgiveness for putting you to so much trouble. But I had been wandering about the moor for hours and hours, and I felt so desperately cold and fagged that I just made for the first light I saw."

"What direction did you come from, Miss Endean?"

She waved her hand unerringly toward the north. "From the coast."

"Then you have had a longish tramp." With difficulty Hugh repressed a scornful smile. Her instinctive gesture had betrayed a knowledge of direction simply marvelous in one who had wandered in the dark for hours. "I suppose you did not meet with any alarming adventures during your wanderings on the moor?"

Joan Endean laughed somewhat ruefully.

"If bogs and mire, and darkness, and pouring rain are adventures, then I had plenty!" she said, with a glance down at her bedraggled skirt. "My frock is simply ruined."

"You did not by any chance encounter the weird creature that is known as 'The Terror of the Moor'?"

Hugh was observing her closely as he put the question, but the beautiful face that was turned toward him was as devoid of expression as a graven mask. But the perfection of her self-control defeated its own purpose—the very absence of the slight surprize or alarm, which any girl would experience on having such a question put to her, told that she was controlling her features with a will of iron.

"I saw nothing of that sort." Her look of interested wonder came just too late to be convincing. "But it sounds fearfully creepy and exciting. What *is* 'The Terror of the Moor'?"

It was Ronnie Brewster who answered her.

"It's just moonshine and fiddlesticks, Miss Endean," he laughed. "My friend here is suffering from an obsession that the moor is haunted by a strange half-human monster which calls itself King of the Moor and goes about bashing people over the head with something

which the newspaper guys usually describe as 'some blunt instrument.' Hugh is a delightful old scout, but he simply refuses to give up his belief in the Bogie Man which I, personally, was skeptical about even when the tears were streaming down my pinafore!"

Joan Endean turned a glance of mingled wonder and amusement on the young medico, and Ronnie immediately proceeded to enlarge on the subject of local superstitions.

"It's curious how these out-of-date beliefs survive in remote country districts, and it is scarcely surprizing that such a lonely and desolate place as Exmoor should have its apparition. It's curious, too, how the fancy of primitive civilization always turned toward monsters of a fantastically composite kind—witness the Centaur of classical times, the Sphinx of ancient Egypt, the Chimera, the Faun, the Satyr—why, the instances might be multiplied indefinitely from the early legends. And you may just as well pin your faith on one of these mythological monstrosities as on Hugh's pet delusion. Why, in these enlightened days even the kids scoff at such tall yarns! This 'Terror of the Moor' has arrived about a couple of hundred years too late to be convincing. He—or it—is an anachronism——"

"Silence, scoffer!" hissed a voice, low, but seeming to be uttered close at hand. *"Another gibe from you, and my magic lightning will blast you as you stand!"*

IN AN instant both men were on their feet. A single sweeping glance was sufficient to show that, with the exception of themselves and the now trembling girl, the room was empty. Their eyes met in a bewildered, questioning stare.

"Well I'll be——"

The end of Ronnie's dazed ejaculation was drowned in a sudden crash of distant thunder. He stood motionless, his face hard as steel, every muscle contracted. When he spoke it was like the snapping of a cord too tightly stretched.

"Give me your pistol, Hugh!" His tone was very different from his former light-hearted bantering. "I'm off on a little tour of investigation."

"Any theory?" inquired his chum, as he relinquished the weapon.

Ronnie Brewster nodded grimly.

"I fancy the sick man upstairs is not quite so sick as we thought him to be!"

With his weapon held ready for instant use, he hurried from the room. Hugh waited until he heard his friend's cautious footsteps die into silence, then turned and looked full into the bloodless face of Joan Endean.

"Isn't it time that you stopped trying to fool me?" he asked quietly. "I've already guessed part of your secret—why not tell me all?"

"All?" she repeated. "You mean about the packet I gave you? You know I can not tell you that—the secret is not mine to tell."

Hugh shook his head.

"I was not referring to the packet, but to yourself."

"I have already told you——"

"A pack of lies!" he interrupted, his face hardening. "You know too much about me, and this house, for a chance visitor. I've played up to you blindly before, my friend—I could have torn your story to rags at any minute—and now I want the truth."

She made to turn away, but he gripped her by the shoulders, holding her so that she was forced to look into his eyes.

"Who and what are you?" he demanded.

For an instant she hesitated. Then the staggering answer came:

"I am an escaped lunatic—and I came to save your life!"

6

HUGH TRENCHARD possessed a keen sense of humor, and at the girl's breath-taking declaration he felt an almost irresistible desire to burst into a fit of laughter. An escaped lunatic? — that might explain all if it were true—her wanderings on the moor on such a night —her palpably false statements that she had lost her way—her mysterious injunction of secrecy regarding the sealed envelope. But *was* it true?

He made no pretensions to being an alienist, but one need not be an expert in mental diseases to know that the average person of deranged intellect is the very last person to admit that he is not normal. The lunatic may believe the whole world to be mad—but not himself. And the collected, almost offhand manner in which she said the words was in itself their own refutation. He looked again into the eyes which were still regarding him fixedly, and the last vestige of doubt was torn from his mind. Whatever else she might be, he decided, she was no lunatic. Still keeping his hand on her shoulder, he drew her toward the chair she had just vacated.

"Sit down," he said gently, "and explain yourself. You have made two very amazing statements, and I find one as hard to believe as the other."

Her color deepened suddenly and her eyes flashed.

"You mean that I am lying?"

"I mean," Hugh said, slowly and deliberately choosing his words, "that you appear to me to be a young lady with an intelligence and quickness of wit far above the average."

Her full red lips curved in a bitter smile.

"And yet two of your fellow-doctors have certified that I am insane!"

"Their names?" cried Hugh, a sudden suspicion flashing through his mind. "What were their names?"

"Doctor Lucien Felger and Doctor Nathaniel Mutley."

Hugh Trenchard slapped his thigh.

"Just as I thought—as pretty a pair of scoundrels as ever disgraced an honorable profession! But allow me to inform you, Miss Endean, their certificate is not worth the paper it is written on. Doctor Lucien Felger, by his own admission, has no status in this country, and if—as I suspect to be the case—you have been confined in an asylum by virtue of that certificate, you would have a sound case if you were to sue him for damages."

Joan Endean nodded her head.

"Yes, it is true that I escaped from the Torside Private Asylum——"

"Then we have a common bond between us," laughed Hugh. "I may as well admit that I was very glad to do the same thing myself no later than yesterday!"

Again she nodded her shapely head.

"I know," she said swiftly. "I overheard you turn the tables on the doctor, and I at once resolved to make my escape and come to you. I could see that you were no friend of Doctor Lucien's, and so I thought you might be willing to help one of his unfortunate victims."

Victims! The word struck a jarring note, for Hugh well knew that the delusion of being persecuted is one of the most common symptoms of a disordered intellect; but at the same time he realized, from his own experience of Doctor Lucien Felger's establishment, that the girl might have good grounds for her words. He stooped and patted her hand reassuringly, and even that chance contact sent a thrill to

his heart such as it had never before experienced.

"You may count on me as your friend, Miss Endean," he said with quiet earnestness. "But whatever happens, rest assured that you have seen the last of the Torside Sanatorium and its rascally proprietor."

Even as he uttered the confident words there came a loud and imperative knock on the door of the house. A look of utter consternation swept across Joan Endean's face as she started to her feet.

"They've come for me—heaven alone knows how they tracked me here!" Her eyes sought Hugh's in pleading entreaty. "Do not let them take me back to that horrible place. Please, please! Tell them I am not here—anything—but don't hand me over to that fiend in human shape!"

"Don't worry about that, Miss Endean. I'll see that you don't go back there."

He spoke with an air of quiet determination, although every impulse urged him to take her slender body in his arms and defy the world to part them. Until then love at first sight had meant little more to him than a stereotyped stock-phrase of novelists and playwrights; but just at that moment her beauty, her helplessness, her almost child-like trust, thrilled and exhilarated him with a new and delightful sense of protection. For her he felt that he could face most desperate odds and be victorious. To win her no task would be too difficult—no peril too great.

He hastily caught up her discarded coat and hat and thrust them into her hands.

"Quick! upstairs with you!" he said in an urgent whisper. "Hide somewhere—I'll put them off the scent."

Together they passed into the shadowy hall. At the foot of the stairs she turned, here face glimmering whitely in the dusk.

"If we do not meet again"—there was a sobbing catch in her voice—"I want you to know that I will be grateful to you as long as life shall last."

"Hurry!" he whispered, and immediately a louder knock sounded on the door.

THERE was a queer half-smile on his set lips as he pulled back the bolts. Gratitude is a cold word when one is hungering for love. Yet what else could he expect? Was he not a mere chance-met stranger—her refuge in a moment when she was ill and unstrung? What was he to her? "A blind, willing tool" was the answer given by his coldly logical brain. Yet all the while his pulses were throbbing madly, keeping time to a new and wonderful song—without tune, without words—a song as old as the human race itself. It was with a feeling of fierce joy that he flung open the door and faced the three dim figures that stood outside. In the tallest of the three he thought he recognized the giant gatekeeper, Dawker.

"Well?" Hugh demanded crisply, unconsciously repeating Felger's greeting to him the previous day. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

There was a slight pause, during which the tall man cleared his throat huskily.

"Beg pardon for disturbing you, sir," he said, and it was the unmistakable voice of Dawker. "One of the mental patients has got away from the Torside Sanatorium—rare dangerous case, sir, homicidal, in fact. If you don't mind, we'd like to have a look round."

"Well, what's stopping you?" asked a cheery voice, coming from behind Hugh. Half turning, he saw Ronnie leisurely descending the stairs, and something in his chum's manner told him that Ronnie

had a very shrewd suspicion how matters stood. "It's very flattering of you to ask our permission, but you are quite mistaken in assuming that we own the surrounding countryside. Exmoor is, as far as I am aware, public property, and you are at liberty to search it as much as you please."

Dawker shifted his feet uneasily.

"I—we—thought the patient might have made for 'ere," he said slowly.

"Indeed?" said Hugh, with an expression of profound surprize. "And what on earth put that idea into your head—or heads?"

"Oh, it was just an idea, gentlemen, just an idea," said Dawker airily. "I suppose you have no objection to us searching the house?"

"On the contrary, my dear Mr. Dawker, I have a very great objection to your setting your foot over the doorstep!"

Dawker glared at Hugh. It was evident that he was longing to renew the contest of the previous day.

"I'm afraid it's my duty to come in." With difficulty he managed to swallow his rage and speak civilly.

"Then it will be *our* painful duty to throw you out again! There's a man seriously ill in this house, and I can't have you tramping all over the place. You'll have to be satisfied with my assurance that we have no person of unsound mind on the premises—unless you or your friends here come under that category."

Dawker stood his ground stubbornly. But he appeared to realize that he was pursuing the wrong tactics; his voice took on a whining tone which was even more nauseating than his former bullying.

"Surely, Doctor Trenchard, you don't mean ter say that you're going to refuse us a few minutes' shelter from the storm?" he whined. "Why, it's not fit for a dog to be out on a night like this."

"In that case, old bean, I'm surprized that you didn't stay indoors!" observed the imperturbable Ronnie. "But if it's shelter you want we can soon fix you up."

"Now that's talking like a gentleman," exclaimed Dawker in a tone of satisfaction.

"Yes—there's a nice dry tool-shed at the bottom of the garden. You're quite welcome to the use of it until the weather clears."

Dawker's manner changed again.

"Funny, ain't yer?" he ground out savagely. "But you'll be laughing out of the wrong side of your mouths presently. You're asking for trouble—and you'll get it soon!"

"We're gluttons for trouble here," Hugh assured him cheerfully, "but we don't mind giving some away. If you doubt my word, just you start some and see!"

But Dawker seemed in no hurry to accept the invitation. He remained where he was, a leering grin on his face as he slowly shook his head.

"Oh, no, my young cock-sparrow. Jem Dawker's too fly to put hisself on the wrong side of the law. I'll leave the perlice to make all the trouble that's necessary!"

"The police!" Hugh could not help exclaiming. Here was a contingency that he had not foreseen.

Dawker gave a coarse, triumphant chuckle.

"Yus—the perlice! Before I set out I telephoned to Sergeant Jopling, asking him to meet me here. How does *that* suit you, hey?"

Hugh checked the first words that came to his lips, and then lifted his shoulders in a shrug of assumed carelessness.

"It suits me excellently." He turned to Ronnie with a laugh. "Our friend Dawker is quite an expert on the phone. It's

true that he makes some intriguing mistakes in the numbers, but he always answers the calls promptly. Did I tell you about his impersonation stunt which missed fire the other day?"

Dawker cursed beneath his breath, for the home thrust had touched him on the raw. He made a quick step forward, murder gleaming in his eyes. His myrmidons each made a similar movement, but before they could come to grips Hugh withdrew his hand from his jacket pocket, and it was gripping something which gave forth a bluish gleam as it reflected the lamplight.

"Up with them, my beauties—as high as they'll go!" he ordered crisply. "The first man who makes a step forward will step into hell."

Three pairs of hands jerked upward with a smartness which would have gladdened the heart of a drill-instructor. The hand which held the revolver was firm and unwavering, and the voice which gave the order was that of a man who meant what he said.

"I shall count ten slowly," Hugh announced steadily, "and then I shall drop any man who remains in sight. Got that? Good! *One . . . two . . . three . . . four——*"

The men had already turned and fled when Ronnie laid his hand on his chum's shoulder.

"Too late, old chap," he said with a despondent shake of his head, at the same time pointing to a pair of distant headlights moving rapidly toward them. "The police are here!"

WITH a smothered groan Hugh thrust the weapon back into his pocket. "We must trust to our wits—they're the only weapons that will serve us now, Ronnie."

"You can count me in for any stunt to get the girl away," whispered the other. "Of course you won't let those beggars take her—she's no more mad than I am! Only say the word, old bean, and I'm game for anything. Shall we bolt the door and stand a siege? Or shall I play the dashing hero at the garden gate like Horatius on the Bridge? You have only to say the word, dear boy."

Hugh could not repress a slight smile at his friend's light-hearted offer. But he shook his head.

"Thanks, Ronnie, but it would be madness to resist. We must settle this matter right now."

A moment later the burly form of Sergeant Jopling loomed through the darkness.

"Hullo! what's the trouble here?" he demanded.

Dawker, hovering cautiously in his rear, took it upon himself to give his version. The policeman looked grave.

"Be good enough to stand aside, sir," he said curtly. "I must search the house."

With a resigned shrug Hugh allowed him to ascend the stairs. In less than two minutes the police sergeant reappeared, his ruddy face a picture of horrified amazement.

"It seems as if I'm too late," he said, looking at Hugh and the other doctor with a queer expression in his eyes.

"The girl is not there?" cried Hugh, his heart buoyed up on a sudden wave of hope.

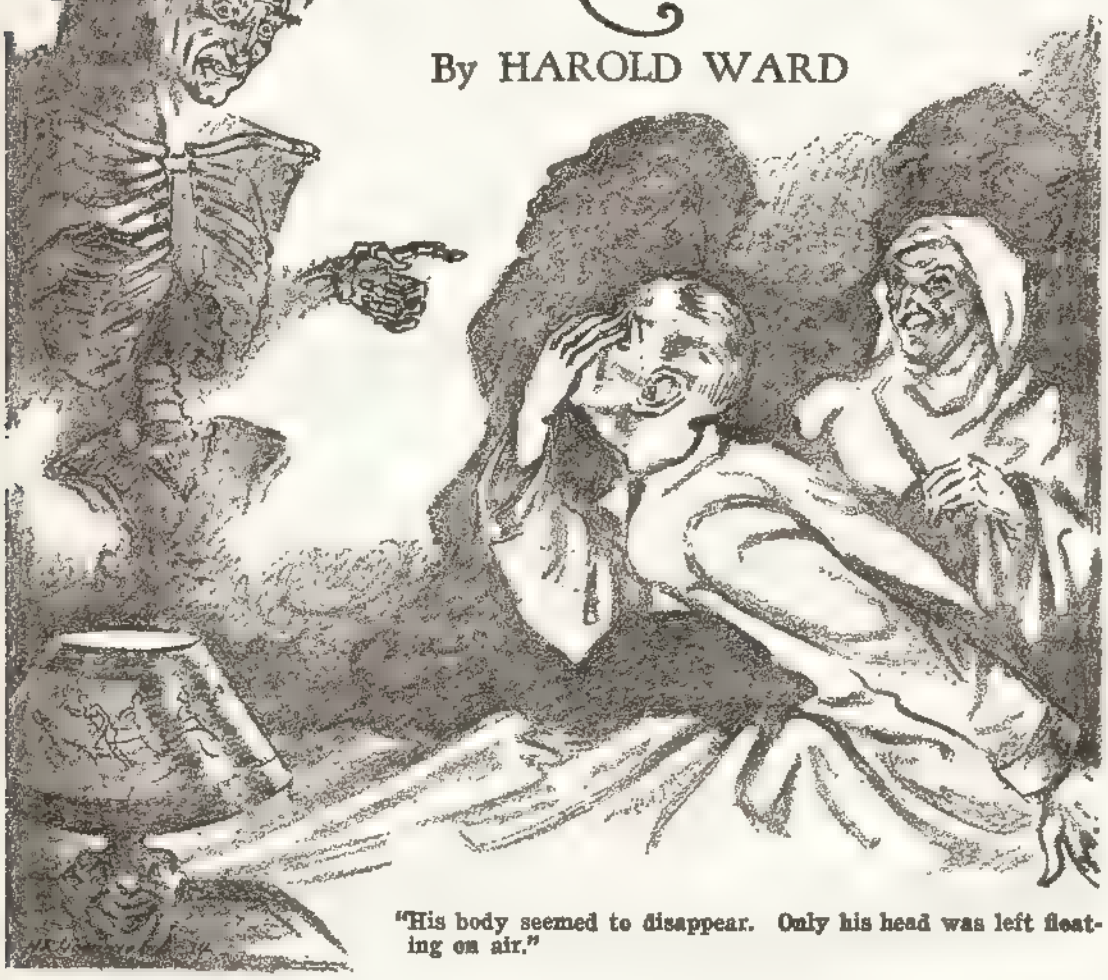
"No," said Jopling, shaking his head. "I've not seen the mad girl, but I've seen her handiwork all right! Old Silas Marle has been murdered in his bed—stabbed to the heart with this!"

He held up his gloved hand, revealing a blood-stained dagger whose hilt was fashioned in the shape of a cloven foot.

The mystery deepens sensationally in next month's chapters of this startling story. Order your copy now.

The Master of Souls

By HAROLD WARD



"His body seemed to disappear. Only his head was left floating on air."

A gripping tale of a Satanist, to whom murder was a commonplace and who wallowed in human misery

1. The Horror

IT WAS my first day at Doctor Peter Dryson's so-called private sanitarium. I had been out of work for a long time and was glad to get the place, even though there was something eery and sinister about the tumbledown old mansion set back in the woods. Dryson had little money; he admitted the fact to me. A specialist, a dreamer, the treatment of the insane offered him an opportunity to try out his pet theories anent the ungeared mind.

I had been to the village for supplies. Darkness had overtaken me. Parking the car in the weather-beaten garage, I hastened around to the front door. My key was in the lock before I noted the absence of light. Yet the little I had seen of my employer led me to believe him capable of almost any sort of eccentricity. Perhaps, I thought, he liked to sit in the darkness and brood. He was a peculiar

chap at best, living alone with a bunch of maniacs, his only help, until my arrival, a half-wit named Ned who worked for his board and room.

Slamming the door behind me, I shuffled down the dark hall, my arm outstretched to avoid bumping into something in the darkness. My groping fingers touched something cold—cold and clammy and hairy. It swung away from me like the pendulum of a clock—swung back and struck me, almost knocking me off my feet.

I leaped back, the packages I carried beneath my left arm dropping to the floor. Fighting off the impulse to turn and run, I explored my pockets for a match. Finding one, I scratched it on the wall. Its feeble glow dissipated the darkness for an instant.

The body of Doctor Dryson hung in the doorway. A rope had been thrown over the top of the transom and knotted about his skinny, hair-covered neck. His toes just touched the floor. His eyes were open and staring. His bearded lower jaw was drooping. His thin face was purple and black.

The match burned itself out as I stood there petrified with fear. Turning, I dashed madly down the hallway to the door. I fumbled with my key. In my excitement I dropped it. My foot struck it and I heard it slide across the polished floor. I searched my pockets for a second match, but failed to find one. I straightened up, my face covered with cold sweat, cursing the rules of the institution that had caused me to lock the door as I entered.

At the end of the hall in Dryson's office was a box of matches. I recalled seeing it on top of the desk. In order to find my key I must go back past the horror that hung in the doorway and grope about the darkened office until I found the matches. For there was no electricity, no gas—nothing but ancient kerosene lamps.

How I mustered up courage enough to negotiate the short distance I do not know. My hair stood up like the quills of a porcupine as I brushed against Dryson's body. An instant later the matches were in my hand. Scratching one, I lighted the big desk-lamp, my fingers trembling so that I could hardly apply the flame to the wick.

I heard a movement behind me, and whirled about. In a distant corner stood Ned, the half-wit, his big, pasty face twisted into a silly grin. In his hand was a huge butcher-knife. Pointing to the dead thing in the doorway, he gabbled excitedly.

"The key! The key!" he exclaimed, slitting the rope with a sweeping stroke of the knife and letting the body drop to the floor.

"I haven't got it," I managed to ejaculate.

He advanced a step toward me.

"Key!" he commanded again. "Ned wants key."

"I dropped it when I entered," I stuttered. "It is on the floor in the hallway."

With a grunt, he stepped over the sprawled body on the floor and entered the hall. A moment later he returned, the key in his hand. Seating himself on the floor beside his dead master, he thrust the key into the latter's pocket and grinned at me again.

"Doctor sleep," he whispered. "Ned watch while doctor sleep."

HE BRANDISHED the knife as I took a step toward him. There was no getting past him. Dropping into the doctor's chair behind the desk, I selected one of the physician's cigarettes from a carton at my elbow and lighted it. The nicotine soothed me.

Then, for the first time, I noted the letter. It was written in pencil. The signature was that of Dryson:

"I am going mad," it read. *"Soon I shall be as bad as the poor devils who are under my care. I am having hallucinations. They are the first symptoms. It has been coming on for several days. The cadavers! I see them moving about in their coffins. God! One of them moved just now. I can stand no more. I will put an end to everything before it is too late —before they lock me up as I have locked these other poor wretches in my custody.*

"Dryson."

Involuntarily I turned my head. Across the room, resting on trestles, were two cheap, black coffins. Dryson had secured them with their grisly contents only a few days before from a near-by poor farm. Poor wretches! Their bodies had been sold to him to help the county pay, in part, the cost of their keep. He had intended using them for experimental purposes.

The face of the man—there were two of them, a man and a woman—was twisted into a smile! Then one of his eyes opened. I saw the glazed eyeball gazing through the glass of the casket top.

The coffin lid was suddenly lifted and the dead body sat upright! Then the lid struck the floor with a splintering crash. The coffin fell from its trestle with a jar that rocked the house. The dead body rolled toward me, bent almost double. It started to arise.

Ned leaped to his feet with a shrill scream.

Then the guttering, flickering lamp went out.

"Ned!" I shouted. "Ned, where are you?"

From the other side of the room came an answering whimper. There was another crash as the glass of the second coffin was broken. For an instant I imagined that Ned had blundered into it and toppled it over. But no. I heard him in a distant corner whimpering and whining. Something floated through the air and twisted itself about my legs. It smelled old and musty. I knew it for a woman's shroud. It tripped me and I went down on all fours. My fingers touched the dead face of Doctor Dryson. I leaped up with a startled cry. One of the maniacs in the back room heard my shriek and gave an answering howl. The others joined in the refrain.

And in the room was something even more horrible than the lunatical gabbling . . . silence. Deep, somber, oppressive silence.

Something bumped against me. There was a howl of mortal terror. A knife buried itself in my arm. I jerked myself loose from the cruel fingers that seemed searching for my throat and flung myself forward, gripping at the imbecile's legs. We went down in a rolling, tumbling heap upon the body of the suicide. I heard the knife tinkle against the floor.

"Ned!" I shouted. "Ned, stop!"

There was no answer. The huge fingers sought my throat again. Somehow I managed to avoid them and leaped to my feet, gasping for breath. I heard the half-wit do the same. For a moment I waited, my body tense, for him to attack again. My foot was braced against the body of Dryson.

The thing suddenly moved. It drew away from my foot. It rose. It stretched itself and yawned.

"Lenore!" a hollow voice called. "Lenore, my soulmate!"

As from a great distance came the voice of a woman.

"I come, beloved! I come!"

Ned screamed wildly. He was berserk

as he threw himself in the direction of the voice. I heard him leap, and tried to dodge. His huge body struck mine. His fingers grasped my coat—tore it from me—grasped it again. Then they closed over my windpipe. I struggled for breath. The blood surged through my head.

How long we fought I do not know. Slowly, gradually the cruel grip tightened. Stabbing pains jabbed me in the lungs. The very life was being squeezed out of me by the fear-crazed man. I ceased hammering at his face and seized his wrists in an effort to tear them from my neck, but in vain. I felt my strength leaving me. Consciousness was slipping . . . slipping . . . slipping. . . .

Suddenly the room was filled with a great light. I felt the air rush into my lungs as the vise-like grip upon my throat was loosened. I sucked it in in great mouthfuls. Over me the flat, pasty face of the idiot danced in ever-widening circles. He half rose, a wild, frightened look creeping over his countenance.

"Ned! Stop! Stop, I say!"

My antagonist rose slowly to his knees, his massive head turned toward the speaker. My own gaze followed his.

Dryson was leaning against the desk. The lamp had been relighted; the half-burned match was still between his fingers. The rope with which he had hanged himself was still knotted about his neck; the end of it hung down over his shoulder like a grotesque necktie pulled out of place. His body was bent forward. His face was still purple and blotched and swollen, yet his eyes glittered like live coals as he snapped his finger at the brainless thing that had almost killed me. The half-wit shuffled to his feet, his head hanging like that of a child caught in some deviltry.

Then consciousness left me.

2. The Master of Souls

I MUST have been unconscious but a short time; for when I opened my eyes again I was still lying on the floor in the center of the room. Doctor Dryson was seated at his desk. On the opposite side stood Ned, bruised and battered. The frayed end of the rope still hung from the transom. The physician had removed the noose from around his neck and had thrown it carelessly upon the pile of magazines and papers before him.

I pulled my reluctant frame into a sitting posture. The movement caused Dryson to turn his eyes in my direction for an instant. Then he returned to the tongue-lashing he was giving the idiot. I noted the mass of debris upon the floor—the smashed coffins, the broken glass, the overturned trestles. A faded bouquet of flowers lay beside one of them, the last gift of some poor friend.

And both caskets were empty! Of that much I was certain. The tops of both were turned toward me.

Was I, too, going insane? It was an impossibility for the dead to walk. And yet—yet I had seen that dead man sit up in his coffin—had seen him leap toward me just as the light went out! And even now the odor of death still permeated the room. I had seen and yet I doubted.

My startled glance strayed across the room. One of the bodies, that of the man, lay on the floor where I had last seen the body of Doctor Dryson. In life he had been old, bent as a result of hard work, his skin parched and leathery and wrinkled, drawn down over his cheek-bones—a man with great, hooked nose and sunken eyes. He was clad in a cheap suit such as the county gives to its charges.

Dryson! Was it possible for a man from whose body the vital spark had been squeezed as a lemon is crushed in a squeezer—was it possible for such a man

to return to the land of the living? Yet Doctor Dryson had achieved the seemingly impossible. He sat before me, a living, animated thing of flesh and blood, apparently none the worse for his horrible experience, for even now the blotched, swollen appearance was going out of his face.

He dismissed the idiot with a gesture. Then as Ned slunk from the room, he turned to me.

"Feeling better, Mister——"

He hesitated.

"I seem to have forgotten your name," he added apologetically.

"Van Gilder," I answered thickly through my bruised lips. "Hubert Van Gilder."

He nodded. Rising, he assisted me to my feet and seated me in an easy-chair on the opposite side of the desk from where he had been sitting. Stepping to a glass cabinet, he cast his eyes over the array of bottles until he found that for which he sought. Mixing a small draft in a glass, he pressed it to my lips and bade me drink. Sick and sore though I was, I shuddered as his flesh came in contact with mine. He noticed this and smiled enigmatically.

"There are many things of which you do not know the meaning," he remarked.

The concoction raced through my veins like molten metal. For an instant I felt as light as a feather. I wanted to rise, to soar to the ceiling. Then my chin dropped to my chest and the longing to sleep surged over me.

"Help me get him upstairs," I heard the physician mutter to some one. "The poor devil is in a fearful condition. Yet his body is worth saving and we must get him back to normal before we can go ahead with our plans."

A woman's voice answered him. It was in the same throaty contralto I had heard when I was battling with Ned in the darkness—the same voice that had answered the mysterious call. I felt myself being lifted. The doctor was on one side of me. The hand of some one else seemed to be beneath my arm. Again the horrible odor of death assailed my nostrils. I turned.

A dried, parchment-like face peered at me with beady little eyes.

It was the face of the dead woman I had seen in the casket. She lifted her shroud with her left hand as she aided the doctor in getting me up the stairs.

WHEN I awoke I was lying in a soft bed. Close by, some one was speaking in a low tone. I was stiff and sore. Every muscle ached from the beating I had received. My lips were puffed and swollen, and my bones seemed to tear and rend my flesh with every movement.

I stirred. The sound of voices ceased.

"Awake, eh?" I heard the voice of Doctor Dryson inquire.

I turned my head with an effort. Then I raised myself to my elbow, my eyes bulging with astonishment.

The dead woman was gliding through the door. Then I had not been dreaming after all!

The doctor reached across the coverlid and pressed his long fingers to my pulse. He halted my exclamation with a gesture.

"No talking, please," he commanded.

Taking a glass of medicine from the bedside table, he poured out a spoonful and pressed it to my lips. Then, pushing me gently back against the pillows, he sat down by the side of the bed and lighted a cigarette.

"Life is a peculiar thing, Van Gilder," he said, as if taking up a conversation where he had left off. "We are the same today, tomorrow and yesterday. In the beginning the Creator of all things put a certain number of egos, of living entities,

upon this world. The same number are here now—will be here a million years from now—no more and no less. Matter is mortal mind, life is infinite mind. From dust we came and to dust we return, but life, the soul, goes on for ever."

He hesitated for an instant as if groping for words with which to explain himself.

"You have just witnessed what, to you, is probably a startling thing. You have watched a dead person—a woman embalmed and in her coffin for several days—walk out of this room. But I tell you that there is no such thing as death. The body wears out, yes; but the soul goes on and on and on until the end of time. And, naturally, it must inhabit many bodies before it is finally called back to its Creator."

His manner was that of a teacher attempting to explain a hard problem to an infant. Then he continued:

"Doctor Dryson is dead. You saw his body hanging from the transom downstairs. You saw Ned, the nit-wit, cut it down. Yet I tell you that Doctor Dryson is not dead, even though it may appear so to you. But his soul can never return to inhabit his body because he tore the two apart. The Creator is not ready for it, nor can it find a resting-place here. Instead it must go on and on and on through space until the end of all things comes.

"Nor am I Doctor Dryson, even though I inhabit his body temporarily. I am Harlow—Harlow, Master of Souls. I could rule the world if I cared to. But of what avail is temporal power? Kings die, thrones crumble. But I—I go on for ever. For I am Harlow.

"But why look startled, my friend? I have been scanning the questionnaire you filled out when you accepted a place here with Dryson. I note that you are an educated man, a graduate of a great university. What matter if you are temporarily out of work—or were until you got this place? Education means development of the soul. And as an educated man you must know that there are more things unknown to the world than the world will ever know. So heed well what I am about to say."

HE LEANED back in his chair and laughed harshly.

"Have you ever heard of the science of metempsychosis? No? Metempsychosis, my friend, is one of the forbidden mysteries—Black Art, in plain words. It has to do with the transmigration of the soul into the bodies of other men or lower animals. Few men have ever understood it. It was practised thousands of years ago, but gradually died out; until today I am the only man in the world who understands it. And why? Because I have lived so long that I have almost forgotten my early life. Of all those who dabbled with the Black Arts centuries ago, I alone survive.

"I prompted Dryson to write that letter which he left on the desk," he chuckled. "I prompted him to kill himself. But why? Because I needed his body—this shell that I am wearing. For many long days my soul—my intellect, my spirit—has been without a decent abiding-place. Because of a slip of judgment—for wise as I am with the wisdom of the centuries behind me, I sometimes grow careless—because of a slip of judgment, I say, the body in which I was dwelling was destroyed—burned. So, too, was the temporal dwelling-place of Lenore, my soulmate. We were wandering through space, she and I, forgetful of time—for time has no meaning to us—and upon our return we found that the bodies in which we had been temporarily dwelling had been destroyed by a fire.

"A peculiar feature of the science of metempsychosis is that, while a soul may enter the dead body of any one, in order to function properly it must enter the body just as the other soul is leaving. We were weary. For a brief time we entered the shells of the two corpses lying in the room downstairs.

"Then the thought came to me to try an experiment. Even though I was not supposed to be able to manipulate the soul from within a dead body such as that I occupied, I willed that Dryson should leave his shell. You know how I turned the trick. His soul passed out of its dwelling-place. Ordinarily I could have separated it from its body in the twinkling of an eye and without going to so much trouble, but I was weary and, as I have said, one must really feel the red blood coursing through his veins in order to be at his best. Then, just as the vital spark was leaving his body, I entered it and revived it—and not a minute too soon to save your soul from passing on."

He lighted another cigarette and, leaning back in the chair, surveyed me from under half-lowered lids.

Was the man a charlatan? Was he a maniac? For an instant I was inclined to believe him one of the two. Then the strange and horrible things that I had witnessed flashed through my mind and I shuddered involuntarily. No. In spite of the fact that things such as he spoke of could *not* happen, I had yet been a witness to their actuality.

But he was speaking again.

"Lenore, my soulmate, is without a proper body," he went on. "Her soul still rests in the withered shell of the old woman from the poorhouse. Not that she particularly cares, since she has, in her time, played many parts. But for the purpose of securing for her a shell in keeping with her wonderful intellect I must, my friend, borrow that which you now inhabit. Not, however, until you have finally recovered. I should hate to see the soul of Lenore in such a battered case.

"It will be for but a short time. Then, if you are the sensible man I take you to be, you will join us. Lenore is a wonderful woman—a woman such as few men have ever met. And, too, I note from the papers you left with Dryson that you have interested yourself in things outside the pale—that you have dabbled in spiritualism and the various 'ologies'. Have you ever read anything along the line of ancient magic—demonology, witchcraft and the like?"

I shook my head weakly. Harlow leaned forward again, his eyes blazing like twin coals.

"You have not even scratched the surface, then, college graduate though you are," he said with a sage shake of his head. "I can offer you an insight into all of them. And what is more, I can make death a joke to you—I can offer you unending life. With two people such as Lenore and yourself to help me—and I have long wanted an assistant to aid me—there will be no limits to what we can do."

He arose suddenly and gazed down on me.

"The chance is yours," he said. "Refuse and I take your body anyway. Accept and I offer you—everything. What do you say?"

I was hypnotized. I must have murmured assent, for his face brightened.

"It is well," he said, half to himself. "However, your wounds are such that you will not be able to get about for a few days. But I will take no chances."

His body seemed to disappear. Only his head was left, it seemed, floating on air. Then it, too, vanished and only the

eyes remained. They seemed to bore into the very core of my brain. I felt the lower part of my body stiffen. My legs became lifeless.

Then the eyes dissolved into space. My head was as clear as a crystal. I sat up in bed. Harlow had gone.

I tried to move. I was bound to the bed by invisible cords. The man's will had predominated. I was helpless.

3. The Master Commands

THE remainder of what I am about to write will sound like the ravings of a disordered brain. In fact, so weird, so unbelievable is it all that I can scarcely believe it myself. Yet I had been through enough to prepare me for anything. Harlow, to give the man his due, had given me fair warning.

Sometimes I wonder if I have not just awakened from a horrible nightmare—a vision so real, so vivid, that it has seared itself indelibly upon my brain. Again the thought comes to me that I am insane. But no. It is neither a dream nor the fantastic imaginings of an obsessed mind. My experiences have been real ones. I have actually lived that which I am setting down on paper. I have only to gaze at myself in the mirror to realize that. I entered the old stone house where Doctor Dryson had his private sanitarium, a young, stalwart, athletic man of eight-and-twenty with wavy brown hair and the clear complexion that comes from a life in the open. Today, although only a few short weeks have passed according to the calendar, my hair is as white as the first snow of winter, while my skin is drawn and parchment-like with deep lines engraved upon my forehead. No, I am not dreaming. Would to God that I was —that I could throw aside this horror and wake up without those haunting recollections!

How long I lay in that sunny, upstairs room of Doctor Dryson's I do not know. I was in a daze. Nights followed days and days followed nights until I lost all recollection of time. Occasionally I heard the wild shrieking of the maniacs. Sometimes I felt the presence of a tall, emaciated form by the side of my bed and the pressure of a spoon to my lips. But most of the time I slept. I know now that I was hypnotized—that under the powerful will of this strange man who called himself Harlow my brain had ceased functioning.

But meanwhile my body was righting itself. For even though my mind was temporarily dead, nature was working steadily. The twisted bones and torn muscles straightened themselves again. The blood left the bruised and battered spots upon my flesh until, when Harlow finally bade me awake, I was a healthy human being again with the rich, red corpuscles racing through my veins. Only my legs were still paralyzed. And I was still in a daze.

IT WAS nighttime when the transformation came, when my legs righted themselves and I regained possession of my faculties. The maniacs had ceased their gibbering, and silence, deep and brooding, had settled over the rambling old house. I felt myself being lifted and carried down the stairway to the room just off the office where the laboratory was located. I attempted to help myself, but a feeling of inertia swept over me and I allowed myself to be dragged along like an ox to the slaughter. Yet something—some sixth sense—warned me, told me that all was not right—told me that I should fight with every ounce of strength that was in me against the unknown horror that was to come.

Yet I did not fight. I felt myself being

laid down. Straps were fastened about my arms and legs and about my middle. As from a great distance two lights appeared. They were like the lamps of an automobile traveling toward me at terrific speed. Closer and closer they came until they resolved into eyes—great, glaring eyes—eyes that seemed to burn into my very brain and twist the gray matter until it sizzled and writhed like a nest of maggots in a bit of cheese.

Then, just as a room is transformed from darkness to light, I found myself in full possession of my faculties. I was strapped upon an operating-table. Over me bent Harlow, his bearded chin almost touching my face. He smiled as he gazed down at me. Then he turned to some one else just outside my range of vision.

"He is well and in splendid condition," he said. "What a man he is! He has the body of an athlete—the sort of body that comes from clean living and clean thinking. Lenore, into such a shell I shall have no fear of transferring your soul until I can find a proper resting-place for it."

I heard a murmur of approval close beside me. I managed to shift my head to one side. The aged dead woman was standing a short distance away. She was still clad in the habiliments of the grave.

Harlow turned to me. His voice lost its harshness and assumed a sort of purring sound. For some reason it reminded me of the purr of a cat that has had its evening milk and is drowsing lazily by the fireside.

"I am about to make an experiment," he said. "It lies with you whether you will assist me voluntarily, whether you will share with me the glory and the profit as a partner and assistant as you agreed or whether you must be forced into it against your will. For several days, ever since I tore you from the grasp of the half-wit, I have been preparing you for the ordeal. I offer you everything—money and all that it will buy—sensual pleasure, fair women—the fairest of them all, Lenore, my soulmate—the opportunity to see things and explore places that mortal eyes were never meant to gaze upon. All this I offer for the temporary use of that great body of yours. Refuse, and I take it anyway. Refuse, and I will tear your soul from your body, and when I am through with your carcass, I will turn it over to the foul beasts of the field and the carrion-eaters of the air. You can make things easy or hard for yourself. Which will it be? I have no time to temporize."

He stopped suddenly. My will was not my own. I know it now, but I did not know it then. A feeling swept over me that it would be folly to oppose this man. Why not allow myself to be swept along with the current? Why not take the easiest way?

If I had only known what was in store for me! Better it would have been had I allowed the beasts to tear me limb from limb as he had threatened. Better had I been burned piecemeal and my ashes scattered to the four winds of heaven. It would have only meant—but why philosophize? Why cry over skilled milk? I did not know. . . . Oh God! I did not know!

Feebly I nodded assent. His eyes lighted up. The man was almost handsome when he smiled.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "Then listen, my friend—listen to me closely. I am about to take your soul from your body. You will feel no pain. Think—think hard that your soul is being separated from the shell in which it dwells. You——"

His final words were lost to me. I felt myself engulfed in blackness. I was falling . . . falling . . . falling through an

endless void. Down . . . down . . . down. . . .

THERE was a feeling of mustiness about me. I felt aged. I seemed to look out upon the centuries and yet I had no clear, distinct thought. Everything was nebulous and foggy. I was being whirled along a river—a wide, sluggish river filled with lotus and strange flowers. Along the banks alligators basked in the warm sunshine. A hippopotamus wallowed in the mud. Palm trees waved in the spice-laden breeze. I was shaking a jingling sistrum. I——

God in heaven! I was a woman! I was the dead woman! I gazed down upon myself. The shroud hung upon me like a bit of sacking. My nostrils were filled with the decay of the grave.

I gazed across the room. My body was still strapped in the chair. Above it hovered a transparent, gossamer-like vapor. I watched it settle upon me. It surrounded me, caressed me. Then it slowly evaporated as it saturated my flesh with itself.

Yes, I saw my body sit up as Harlow tore the straps from about my wrists. I saw myself stretch forth my hands and caress him. I stroked his hair, his face, his body as he bent over me and unbuckled the straps about my ankles. I saw him shrug his shoulders and coldly push me away. He laughed harshly.

"We win again, Lenore!" he chortled. "We win again! Come, gaze upon yourself in the mirror and see what a handsome boy you make—a radical change from the dried and wrinkled form of the hag yonder. Soon the body which you now inhabit will be yours to toy with, yours to play with, yours to torture with your beauty and your arts. You have always cared for love, Lenore. Too bad that I have not the time to gratify your desires. But enough prattle. Run upstairs and dress. I want to gaze upon you again as a woman—the woman of my dreams—the woman I have loved through the ages. With my skill it will be easy to pick a shell for you—a girl of wondrous beauty. Then I will weave my spell about her so that she will be ready when I call."

I say that I heard and saw all this. Yet it was in an impersonal way. I was, well, I was like an actor who gazes upon himself as the film in which he has played unrolls itself before him on the silver screen. Yes, I saw myself dart through the door. I heard my footsteps echo through the hollow hall. Yet I was a woman—a dried and shriveled crone with bent back, toothless, gray-haired, tottering and scarcely able to walk. Yes, and clad in the grave-clothes furnished by the supervisor of the poor.

4. Black Art

WOULD to God that I might forget that which I am now about to write. It is all so horrible, so monstrous, so diabolical that it horrifies even me, inured though I am to Harlow's ghoulish atrocities. I say that it horrifies me. Do I mean that? It horrifies me to write of it now, but then I thought little of it. I wonder why? There is only one answer: I was under the spell of Harlow and his mate, Lenore. I was like a man in a daze. My will was his will. But I digress.

Scarcely had Lenore—I say Lenore, although it was I, for she was attired in my earthly form—scarcely had she entered the room and seated herself when Harlow pressed the button which summoned Ned. The half-wit shuffled into the big laboratory, the sleep still in his dull eyes. He had dressed hurriedly to obey the summons; he yawned and stretched himself

like a man still in a doze as he stood before the man he believed his master.

"Ned comes," he said. "Doctor send for Ned with button."

Harlow nodded. His long arms darted toward the other. From the ends of his fingers electric sparks appeared to leap. The half-wit straightened himself, grinned idiotically, then obediently climbed into the chair I had so recently quitted. An instant later he was asleep, his huge body paralyzed by the hypnotic powers of the master metaphysician.

Harlow worked fast. With Lenore's assistance he tore the clothing from the half-wit's body. There was no need to strap the idiot to the chair. He was too deeply under the influence of the master to move.

I sat there spellbound, fascinated, and watched them practise their hellish rites. I saw Lenore hand Harlow the long, sharp knife. I saw him plunge it into the idiot's abdomen and cut with a peculiar, twisting, sideways motion of the wrist. Ugh! It was horrible—too horrible for me to put on paper.

He stepped back, his body bent forward, his keen eyes gazing at the flow of blood and viscera, watching every twisting stream as it flowed across the floor.

The hypnotized man in the operating-chair made little movement. Such as he did make while the life slowly left his body was watched as closely as was the flow of blood. Once I heard Harlow give a startled exclamation; it changed to a cry of satisfaction as Lenore pointed to where a tiny stream of blood, striking against a protuberance in the floor, had twisted to the right. Then again and again came the same deep sigh of satisfaction as he pointed here and there to various changes in the gruesome mass.

Finally he straightened up and touched his companion—touched my body—upon the shoulder.

"The signs favor us, loved one," he whispered. "I see your soul clothed in wondrous beauty. I see happiness for all three of us—a future as bright as the silver of yonder crone's hair. And see"—he pointed to one of the crimson streams —"see, even the way is pointed out for us. And the signs say that it must be tonight."

She nodded and turned away.

I leaped to my feet. Harlow seemed to notice me then for the first time, so absorbed had he been in his hellish incantations.

"Anthropomancy," he said in answer to my unspoken question, "the art of forecasting the future by the use of human entrails and viscera. It was once in great favor, but was stopped by the authorities and eventually became one of the black sciences. It never fails!"

He stopped, startled for an instant by my look of horror.

"Wipe that look off your face, my friend," he chuckled. "When you have delved in the black arts as long as I have you will cease to consider the life of one person as compared to the good of the whole. And Ned—what was he? A nit-wit, doomed to go through life smirking and grinning. If there is a God as we say there is, is not Ned better off with Him than here on this earth, a brainless gob of flesh and blood? For the first time in his life he has been of use. Forget the horror of what you have seen and come on. Soon you will be back within your own body with Lenore—my Lenore—by your side. You have not yet begun to witness my power."

Again I obeyed his command. The automobile was waiting outside. I followed him to it. Lenore was waiting on the porch. He climbed beneath the wheel

and pressed the starter, secure in the knowledge of what he had learned through his hellish arts.

5. *The Stolen Body*

SOMEWHERE a dance was in progress. The soft, sensual music was wafted to us on the breeze as we rolled along the smooth, concrete highway. From out of the darkness came the sound of girlish laughter and the silvery tinkle of crystal goblets. I could vision the graceful movements of the dancers, the rhythmic sway of body clasped to body, the bright lights, the glitter of jewels against pink flesh, the gayety of it all.

The sudden turn of the car as Harlow twisted the wheel to the left threw me against the cushions. An instant later we were gliding along a narrow, country lane where the trees almost touched overhead, so heavy was the foliage. After going a short distance he pulled off to one side of the road and listened. For a moment we sat there as he whispered something to his companion. Then, opening the door, they got out and assisted my withered form to the ground, throwing a blanket over my shoulders lest the whiteness of my grave-clothes show too vividly against the darkness of the night. Then they led the way through the brush and foliage to a lawn trimmed to velvet smoothness and across it to the house whence the music came.

It was a wonderful structure of brick and mortar, a veritable castle in size, surrounded by wide porches and great sun-parlors and conservatories. The side from which we approached was almost in darkness; there was a single dim light in the sun-parlor from which a big French window opened upon a little terrace separated from the house by a cluster of barberries and sumac bushes. The ballroom was on the opposite side of the wide hall. The big door was open and through it we could see the dancers as they glided across the waxed floor. The wide driveway swung around to that side, also; we could glimpse the liveried chauffeurs standing around the cars parked along the edge of the brilliantly lighted lawn. Yet, as I have said, that part of the grounds where we found ourselves was deserted. So, too, was the brilliantly lighted sun-parlor into which we peered as we crouched in the midst of the clump of bushes.

None of us spoke. As for myself, I had no inclination to speak. I was dissociated from myself, as it were. Yet I was there, and at the same time I was not there, it seemed. I knew that I was the dead woman whom Harlow and his companion were looking after so carefully. Yet it was my body standing by Harlow's side. I can not describe my feelings. As well not try.

Harlow was bending forward, his forehead furrowed in concentration. Suddenly there was a stir from within the house. He laid his hand on his companion's arm. I say *companion,* for I can not say *my* arm. Yet it was upon my arm that he laid his hand.

"The divination works!" he exclaimed beneath his breath. "Look, soulmate of mine, at the shell my arts have produced for you."

A woman was entering the sun-parlor. Dim though the light was, the semi-darkness could not obliterate or hide her rare beauty. She was tall and slender—slightly taller than the average of womankind —with great, dark eyes and hair the color of a starless sky. She was graceful; every movement was lissom and pantherish. The thought flashed through my mind that here was a woman meant for loving and for love—a woman who would fight like a fiend out of Hades for the man she loved and go down to the very dregs of

purgatory for him, but who, once scorned, would rend and tear and bite and kill—the kind of woman with whom a man like Harlow would naturally mate.

I knew that Harlow, through his devilish incantations, had realized all the time that she would be there and that she would be the kind of woman that she was. I knew, too, that he had called to her through space. How did I know these things? I can not answer. It was natural for me to know them; more I can not say. I watched her throw herself upon a divan. She yawned behind her slender white hand. That she was bored—that she had stolen away from the other dancers for a moment's relaxation—was apparent. I saw Harlow's gaunt shoulders heave and his lean muscles contract as he gazed at her. Then his long arms were extended toward her. From the tips of his fingers leaped sparks. The girl on the divan half aroused, yawned, then dropped back with a little sigh. Her graceful form relaxed and she seemed to sleep.

Harlow was working rapidly now. The dim light from the sun-parlor reflected the great globules of sweat that stood out upon his pale brow. His eyes glittered like live coals. The girl on the divan seemed to disintegrate. . . . She pulled herself together, as it were. . . . Then, rising, she walked slowly through the open French window toward us.

An aura surrounded her. It was thin, fog-like, vaporish. From the body of the man beside Harlow—from *my* body—emanated the same white fog. We were surrounded by it. The two vapors met—blended into one—separated again. Then my body—the body of Hubert Van Gilder—dropped to the ground like an old rag. Over it hovered the fog-like mist from the woman. . . . She reeled. . . . Her slender fingers caught hold of the bush for support. . . .

Then the gossamer-like vapor that surrounded my body — that had emanated from my body—was upon her. It surrounded her . . . it dissolved within her. She straightened up and heaved a great sigh. Her wonderful eyes gazed upon Harlow in token of surrender. They were filled with a peculiar light—a love-light—the light of the ages.

The eyes of the master were turned upon me — upon my withered form. Again I felt the strange, eery sensation that I had felt before. Again the feeling of falling . . . falling . . . falling . . . of complete separation from everything. Then the mist cleared before my eyes.

I was again within my own body. Involuntarily my arm reached out and drew the soft, yielding form of the wonder-woman to me. She did not resist. Harlow noted the movement and grinned sardonically. Then, with a peculiar shrug of his shoulders, he turned away and pointed downward.

The body of the dead crone, the winding-cloth torn and disarranged, lay on the ground by the side of the bush. Over it hovered the gossamer-like vapor that Harlow had extracted from the body of the girl who stood by my side. Even as I gazed upon it, the fog dissolved itself within the dead and shriveled flesh. The twisted body seemed to shake itself. It arose. It turned its wrinkled face toward the master of us all—toward Harlow.

He muttered a command. Slowly, sadly, her feet making a peculiar dragging sound as she shuffled along, the hag crept across the brick terrace. She passed through the French window into the sun-parlor and dropped upon the divan where the wonder-woman had so recently rested.

We turned to Harlow. He was already half-way down the terrace in the direction of the car. We followed. The machine stood where we had left it. He climbed

wearily under the wheel. The girl made a movement to seat herself beside him, but he jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the rear seat.

"Have you forgotten the many days that we have been separated?" she asked sadly.

He chuckled, half to himself.

"I know that I hold your love—that no one can take you from me—so why should I be jealous?" he answered.

I could sense the angry crimson creeping into the woman's face.

"As cold-blooded as any lizard that ever crept across a cellar floor," she snarled, taking the seat beside me.

Again Harlow chuckled. Then he threw in the clutch. The car backed, turned, then glided like a thing alive down the narrow lane onto the cement highway again.

FROM the house came a shrill scream of terror. The music stopped with a crash. Then a woman screamed again. The girl beside me turned her sweet face toward me and pressed her fingers over mine.

"They have found it," she whispered. "They have found the horrible thing which was once my dwelling-place—the thing in which the soul of the woman whose body I now wear is imprisoned.

I clutched her in my mad embrace. She made no effort to evade me, yet there was no answering warmth in the pressure of her lithe body against mine.

"I love you! Love you! Love you!" I cried, forgetting in the intensity of my passion the man in the seat ahead. "Who are you, woman? Who are you?"

"To you I am Lenore—Lenore, the soulmate of Harlow, the master of us all," she answered. "I always have been and always will be. What matters what body my soul wears? In its day it has worn many garbs. I have been a queen and a priestess. Oh, I have been many women in many places. But this shell, methinks, becomes me best of all—far better than that of the dried and wrinkled crone back yonder."

Her soft breath fanned my cheek. A wisp of her scented hair touched me. The subtle fragrance of her body was wafted to my nostrils. I was intoxicated. Forgotten was the fact that in order to give this woman—this intelligence—this soul—a dwelling-place I had helped rob another woman's soul of its rightful home. Forgotten was the hell that I had gone through. Forgotten was the fact that I was chained by invisible chains to this monster, Harlow—this master of souls, this purveyor of the black arts, this ghoul. Forgotten was everything in the thought that this woman, this glorious creature by my side, was living, breathing, and that I wanted her—that my whole being cried out for her.

Harlow, turning slightly in his seat, gazed back at us. He laughed—a harsh, sardonic, hellish laugh.

6. *A Million-Dollar Coup*

HARLOW! Is it possible for me to describe the man—if man he is? Metaphysician! Psychologist! Psychic! Necromancer! Sorcerer! Delver into everything weird, mysterious, uncanny, devilish! Alchemist! Philosopher! Hydromancer! Satanist! Stealer of souls and master of ghouls! A creature utterly without human impulse—a thinker only in terms of the abstract. A man who wallows in human misery and fattens on the blood of innocent victims. A man who cares only for the soul because, he says, the soul knows not the meaning of time and because the soul alone is life and intelligence.

To him the temporal body is only a

temporary dwelling-place for the soul—a thing to be discarded when worn out, as one discards an old suit of clothes or a salamander throws off its skin in the springtime. To him death is nothing. He can not—or will not—die. He professes to believe in a God; yet he is a practitioner of the Black Mass.

Because the soul merely transfers its abiding-place from one body to another he has no regard for human life. He snaps his fingers at murder. To kill, he says, is merely to destroy the shell. The soul, he claims, never dies.

Have I explained his weird philosophy? Perhaps not. I do not understand it myself. And my vocabulary is limited when speaking of such a man. As I have said, to him the human body is nothing. Therefore he is a man without human passions such as greed and jealousy. Take, for instance, Lenore and myself. To secure a proper dwelling-place for Lenore's soul he filched the body of the beautiful girl at the ball. He knew that it was inevitable that I would fall in love with her. He cared not the snap of his finger.

Knowing his views, I asked him one day why he went to so much trouble to secure the shell he desired when other and commoner women were to be had for the taking and with much less work —women who lived and breathed just as did the glorious girl he had reincarnated.

"A human body is a human body," I argued, knowing even as I spoke that I would be worsted. "What matters it, then, whether Lenore is beautiful or whether she is as homely as purgatory? Because, according to your theory, the body is merely the shell which houses the soul."

He turned to me with an enigmatical smile.

"True," he answered. "A diamond is a wonderful stone, and whether it be set in brass or wood or iron it would still be a diamond. Yet the brass or wood or iron would not show its real beauty to the extent that platinum or gold shows it. The soul of my Lenore is a jewel beyond price—a jewel more wonderful than the soul of any man or woman I have ever met. Therefore I have provided a proper setting for it."

He turned back to his work, leaving me to digest his remark as I saw fit.

I HAVE said that Horatio Harlow is utterly devoid of human emotion. He is as cold-blooded as any lizard or water-newt that ever crawled on its belly through the muck and morass of the dismal swamp. Let me revert once more to Lenore to explain my meaning. Here is a wonder-woman—a creature so radiant that her beauty dazzles the eye. I thought that she was beautiful when I saw her that night in the sun-parlor, but then her soul was that of an ordinary woman—one of the common herd, as it were. She was a society butterfly, a pampered pet and nothing more. But with the essence of life of Lenore inside that wondrous body she becomes more than beautiful—she is divine. This woman is Harlow's. She belongs to him—she is his, body and soul—his soulmate. Yet he rarely gives her more than a passing glance, caring a million times more for her intellect than her body. For all he knows — or seems to care — she and I might sit and croon and love for hours at a time. He apparently pays no more attention to us than he would to a pair of goldfish in a glass tank.

I have tried to make love to her. I confess it. So far will she allow me to go and no farther. There is no warmth in her fair body when I press it to mine—no flutter of response. Yet she keeps me dangling at the end of her string, hoping

—ever hoping—that some day I may catch her off her guard and win her away from him. And yet she seems to have no fear, even though she possesses the uncanny power of reading my thoughts. Nor, as I have said, does Harlow seem to have a single jealous thought. I can not understand them.

I love this woman of Harlow's, ghoul though I know her to be, a creature as foul and degraded as is her master. Did I not see her assisting him in his hellish rites? Once I mustered up courage enough to question her regarding this. She looked at me wonderingly.

"Both the Romans and the Etruscans employed such methods of divination," she answered. "I remember in Rome we had *aruspices,* or officers, appointed for such duties. The entrails have ever been regarded as being the best method of learning the truth."

The Romans! She spoke of them as we would speak of the inhabitants of England or France. What a woman she is! For her I have passed through the fires of hell and suffered the tortures of the damned. For her I have sold my soul to the devil — for Harlow is the devil. And yet—even though I know now that she has betrayed me — I would forgive everything to feel the pressure of her rounded arms about me.

Harlow's beliefs are Lenore's beliefs. She tells me again and again that she still has remembrances of nights spent under the soft Egyptian sky. She declares that she is old—so old that she has forgotten when she first commenced to remember. She says that from the very beginning she and Harlow were mated—that they will remain affinities until the very end of time. And yet she allowed me to love her—to fondle her—up to a certain point. Why? I have asked myself that question a thousand times. Love, she says, is but a passing fancy—a temporary mating of the sexes. Her body means nothing to her, for in her time she has occupied many, many shells. She expects to occupy many more before she is called to her Maker. What, then, is the answer to it all? Can it be that Harlow is using her to hold me to him? The man is cold-blooded enough to use even her in order to accomplish his hellish purpose. But let me go on.

The fact that Harlow chooses to appear in the body of a man past middle age means nothing to her. To her, just as to Harlow, it is the soul—the intellect—that counts. Soon the bodies they are both wearing will be dust. And above all she knows that she can hold mankind in the hollow of her hand because of her beauty. It is to Harlow's interest that she holds fools like myself.

Perhaps I have rambled on at too great length. But I have attempted in my feeble way to portray this strange pair—to acquaint those who read this screed with their weird and hellish philosophy. Their souls are gnawing at the very vitals of our civilization. Let us hope that something I may have written will keep other men from falling into the trap that I have stumbled into.

DAYS passed. Long, uneventful days. Lenore and I spent them wandering. Would that I could say that they were spent in the Elysian fields of love. Then my sacrifice would not have been in vain. Harlow spent them in poring over the accounts of poor old Dryson. The fire which had destroyed the temporary abiding-places of his and Lenore's souls had, for the nonce, thrown his plans out of gear, and it was necessary for him to readjust himself and reorganize. And, too, knowing that time meant nothing, he was content to lie about and laze and doze like

a great snake that has sated its appetite for blood. To carry out his experiments —for him science is the breath of life— money was needed in great quantities. Dryson had a small nest egg in the bank. Harlow drew it. It was only enough to finance his plans temporarily.

The old sanitarium he retained. There was something about it, set back as it was in the gloomy woods, the yard weed-grown, the iron shutters rusted, that seemed to fit in with his peculiar temperament. I have noted that men such as he are always associated with caves and ruined houses, with churchyards and vaults. Nor did he make any effort to rid himself of the maniacs in the rear of the house. He chuckled to himself as he told us that their howlings would serve to drown out the shrieks of his victims.

Finally he was ready for his coup— his coup to rehabilitate himself financially. His plan was clever—diabolically so. But to explain it, let me change tack and begin anew.

The whole world is familiar with the fact that Antone Loman, the steel magnate, died on the twentieth of last June. His sudden taking away was front-page news in every newspaper on the globe. So, too, was his peculiar will, read a few days after his burial. To his wife and son he left the bulk of his vast fortune. But to one Doctor Peter Dryson, owner of an obscure little sanitarium for the treatment of the insane, he left a million dollars.

The day that the terms of Antone Loman's will were made public, the newspaper reporters wore a pathway to the door of our little sanitarium. Sitting in an upstairs window, I gazed out at them as they trooped down the flagstone path. I chuckled with Lenore at the way Harlow's plans were working out. I, posing as the pseudo Dryson's assistant, watched him weep hypocritical tears as he told again and again the story of his strange friendship with Antone Loman—a story untrue from start to finish.

A short paragraph in Loman's will made that million-dollar bequest front-page "copy." Many wealthy men leave that amount to friends and the world never knows of it, nor cares. The same paragraph made Dryson's face a familiar one to every newspaper reader in the world. Briefly, Loman stated in leaving the money to Dryson that, several years before, he had found himself suddenly growing mentally unbalanced. Antone Loman insane? He, the greatest man in the financial world, a maniac? Unwilling, because of his prominence, to consult any of the famous specialists of his acquaintance, he had sought out Doctor Peter Dryson, and, letting his family and friends think that he had gone to Europe, had placed himself under the specialist's care.

Dryson had cured him. And what was more to the point, he had refused to accept more than the usual fee, nor had he ever attempted to extort any additional sum in the years that followed. Therefore the magnate had left the million dollars to Dryson in the hope that he would use it in his experiments to benefit the mentally afflicted.

Little wonder that the newspaper reporters flocked to the sanitarium or that flashlights boomed, filling the gloomy interior with acrid smoke and causing the maniacs in the rear to howl and shriek until the air was filled with their ravings. Little wonder that the picture of Dryson became known overnight. For had the mental condition of Antone Loman become known, it would have caused a financial panic.

I, Hubert Van Gilder, sentenced to die for a murder I never committed, occupant of a body I never saw until a few days

ago, make this charge: Doctor Horatio Harlow, posing as Doctor Peter Dryson, whose body he had stolen, killed Antone Loman. Doctor Horatio Harlow forged the name of Antone Loman to that will. Antone Loman was never mentally deranged, nor did he even know Doctor Peter Dryson.

Now let me explain.

7. *Harlow Wins Again*

WHEN everything was ready for his coup, Harlow took a short vacation. Going to the city, he spent several days in studying the customs and everyday life of Antone Loman.

Immediately upon his return he took Lenore and me into his confidence and trained us carefully in our duties. Satisfied that we were letter perfect, he took us back to the city with him.

Upon some pretext he gained entrance to Loman's private office. I was with him. Lenore, meanwhile, remained in the car just outside. For a moment he discussed some trivial matter with the great financier. Then he caught the other off his guard. I could see his terrible eyes sparkle as they burned their way into the millionaire's brain. Loman started to get up, only to sink back into his chair again. Slowly, as if fighting against the power that was tearing his soul from his body, he succumbed. Above him rose a white, vaporish mist.

Harlow was working like a fiend. The sweat stood out on his forehead in great beads as he separated his own soul from its abiding-place. An instant later it entered the huge body of Antone Loman. He leaped to his feet. His own discarded body—the body of Doctor Peter Dryson—was in a chair on the opposite side of the desk. Into it he drove the soul of Antone Loman. He deadened the other's power of thought. Within the body of Doctor Dryson was the spark of life and nothing more. The intellect was temporarily dead.

I assisted the shell of the doctor in which the financier's soul was imprisoned through the door.

"A slight attack of vertigo," I explained to the private secretary as we left the office.

Even before we were out of the big waiting-room, Harlow had pressed the button on the big, flat-topped desk.

"Get my lawyer!" I heard him snap to Loman's secretary in the millionaire's crisp tones. "Tell him to come immediately. I want to change my will."

So, while the will was being changed, the soul of Antone Loman, imprisoned in the body of Doctor Dryson—a soul benumbed and without the power of thought because Harlow so commanded—was in the automobile with Lenore and myself.

Horatio Harlow was too shrewd to make a mistake at this stage of the game. There were many, many things connected with the business affairs of Antone Loman that he did not know. He took no chances. He allowed no one else in the office while the lawyer drew up the new will. Loman's secretary typed it. Two of the clerks were called in to witness it. Then, pleading weariness, he left the office.

Reaching Loman's home, he retired immediately to his study on the plea of having some important matters to ponder over. He declined dinner. Shortly after dark he took a short walk, as was Loman's usual custom. The automobile was just around the corner. I was at the wheel, Lenore beside me. In the rear seat sat the body of Doctor Dryson. Opening the door, Harlow leaped inside. It took him but an instant to change bodies again with Antone Loman.

Three minutes later the real Loman left

the car, but with the doings of Harlow so indelibly impressed upon his mind that he imagined them to be his free and voluntary acts. His meeting with us in the automobile was, at Harlow's command, erased from his memory.

A WEEK passed . . . two weeks. Time enough for Harlow's ends. It was late at night when he commanded Lenore and me to meet him in the laboratory off from the office. In the rear of the house the maniacs howled and rattled the bars of their cages as if they scented the death that was in the air. We unlocked the door leading into the cell room. One of them more violent than the others shrieked at us and spat like an angry cat. His antics attracted Harlow's attention. He stopped with a cynical smile.

"The very man for our purpose," he chuckled.

Together we overpowered the poor devil and dragged him, howling and gibbering, back into the laboratory. We strapped him onto the operating-chair. I stepped back, expecting that Harlow would again resort to his hellish rites of divination. Instead, he took a syringe from the cabinet and, filling it with some colorless liquid, jammed the needle into the shrieking devil's arm. Then he pushed home the plunger.

"He will be dead in thirty seconds," he said quietly.

A second later the madman's ravings ceased. A startled look crept into his eyes. He glared at us pathetically. For an instant a look of sanity swept over his face.

"God!" he said hoarsely, as if knowing the fate that was soon to be his. "Oh, Mary, Mother of Christ, protect me!"

His muscles contracted spasmodically. He heaved a great sigh. He was dead.

Harlow turned to me.

"The essence of life—the soul—is a peculiar thing," he said coldly. "For instance, it is easy for me to separate the soul from its body. But it must have a resting-place. For only the Creator can separate soul and body and keep them apart for ever. Therefore I have killed this poor devil—a blessing to him. His soul goes to its Maker. His body belongs to me."

He motioned us to be quiet. He turned his face toward the city. Lenore and I, cowering in a corner, were silent as we watched him. His arms were extended in an attitude of supplication. From the ends of his fingers shot sparks. The lamps had been extinguished, yet the room was filled with a weird greenish-blue light. It danced and flickered, making grotesque shadows on the walls. It surrounded Harlow like the phosphorescence that so often surrounds one who has long been dead.

"Come!" he whispered. "Come, Loman! It is Harlow who calls! Harlow, your master. I command it!"

From out of the darkness came a great sigh—a mournful, wailing sigh. It was the sobbing of a soul in purgatory.

Through the strange, weird light drifted a white, fog-like vapor. It circled around Harlow for an instant. He caressed it, running his hands through it, molding it, it seemed, to suit his ends. And all the while he was gliding with it toward the body of the dead man on the chair—the man we had murdered. It settled down upon the clammy thing. It disappeared within him.

Harlow straightened up with a sigh of relief and ordered us to relight the lamps. This task completed, I turned toward the dead man again.

He was alive!

His eyes were open. He gazed at us

dully. Yet there was no intelligence, no comprehension in his look.

Harlow unbuckled the straps and lifted him to his feet. He stumbled back into his cell, a broken, subdued creature.

"Tomorrow we will notify his relatives that he is better," Harlow chortled. "Perhaps they will want to take him away with them."

Next morning the papers announced that Antone Loman had been found dead in bed. The verdict of the coroner's jury was heart disease.

I make this statement. Horatio Harlow, Master of Souls, killed Antone Loman with the power of his thought. I was a witness to the deed. I solemnly swear that the soul of Antone Loman is imprisoned within the body of the maniac in the pseudo Doctor Dryson's sanitarium.

8. *The End Draws Near*

MY TIME has come. I am to die within the hour. From where I sit I can look through my barred window and see the workmen completing the scaffold on which my life is to end. A moment ago they tied a bag of sand to the rope and dropped it through the trap to test the strength of the hempen cord and take the stretch out of it. Outside my cell a black-robed priest kneels and mutters his paternosters. He tried to talk to me; I sent him on about his business, but he persists in praying for me. As if prayer could help me! Harlow, not God, can save me. And Harlow, curse his foul soul, has deserted me. He promised to return and he has not kept his word.

They say that I am Oscar Schwengel, killer *de luxe*. What avail to tell them that they are mistaken—that I am Hubert Van Gilder? They would laugh at me. Perhaps they would call me insane and send me to an asylum. I have had enough experience with such institutions. No, I would rather die than meet such a fate.

Yet I am Hubert Van Gilder. That is, my soul is confined within the body of Oscar Schwengel while his accursed soul is within my frame, the plaything of Horatio Harlow. Perhaps he is even now fondling Lenore as I have fondled her so many times in the past. I shudder when I think of it. Yet the writing of my story gives me pleasure and my jailers let me do as I please. They think that writing will keep my mind off my coming death.

This Schwengel is many times a murderer. He is a mental pervert. He is an atavism—a caveman. He thinks only in terms of blood.

Harlow, who rarely looks at a newspaper—a man to whom current events mean nothing and whose only thought is of his experiments—chanced to pick up a paper that had been wrapped about a package of supplies. There in glaring headlines was the story of Schwengel's foul career. It interested Harlow. He was filled with the desire to seize this rebellious soul, to experiment with it, to watch it writhe under the pin-pricks of his stronger will. For, just as the naturalist seeks out a new butterfly to add to his collection, so does something different in the human soul appeal to Harlow. The squirming and twisting of the essence of life means the same to him as the wriggling of a new species of bug means to the naturalist.

We had been idle for several days. I say this in a conservative sense, for Harlow's brain was never idle. Yet there had been little of moment happening. The three of us—he and Lenore and I—had made several excursions — pleasure trips, he called them. We had robbed a dozen cemeteries of their dead. Foul creature that he is, there is no attraction to him like cemeteries, dead things, swamps and dank morasses.

He had had a force of carpenters at work. Now his laboratory was equipped with a complete cooling system. The old house had been wired for electricity and a private system installed. Upon the shelves of our new morgue now rested dead bodies—the bodies of those we had filched from their graves. Under the influence of his powerful will Lenore and I had projected our souls into their moldering bodies. Clad in musty cerements we had cavorted and danced, talked and held high revelry.

Now, however, he was tiring of all these things. His active mind demanded a change. The wild, blood-saturated Oscar Schwengel offered him the mental stimulus that he needed.

He read the paper carefully. When he had finished, he turned to me.

"A mental pervert in many ways," he said thoughtfully, pointing down at the article with his long forefinger. "A throwback, an atavism, a caveman. He murdered his wife—her whole family—in a frenzy of rage because she burned the meat while cooking supper. He killed a policeman who attempted to arrest him. Before that he was mixed up in innumerable escapades. His entire life has been a series of outbreaks against modern civilization and its man-made laws. What a chance for observation if I but had him in my charge!"

For a long time he was silent. Then his face suddenly lighted up and he told me of his plan. Lenore joined in with him in urging me to help him. And I, poor dupe, in order to win her favor, fell in with it.

NEXT day we visited the penitentiary where Oscar Schwengel was confined. Harlow, masquerading as Doctor Peter Dryson, was received with open arms, thanks to the advertising he had secured through Loman's will. He introduced me as his assistant. Then he asked permission to visit Schwengel alone with me, saying that he wished to study him. The warden, anxious to please so prominent a character, readily gave his consent. Ten minutes later we were in the cell with Oscar Schwengel.

Harlow played his cards well. For a few minutes he conversed with the arch-murderer, preparing him, without his knowledge, for the ordeal to come. Suddenly his face changed. I saw his eyes boring into Schwengel's soul and bidding it come forth. The killer *gasped*—sat suddenly upright. Then he dropped back, his eyes glazed. A mist-like vapor rose over him. It was tinted with red because of the blood that was on his soul.

Harlow turned to me. I was used to the sudden changes of my soul. The transfer took but an instant. I felt myself dropping. . . .

I found myself sitting in the chair occupied by Oscar Schwengel. *I was Schwengel!* And he, the bloodthirsty killer, occupied my body. He was dull, stupid. Harlow had seen to that. He almost stumbled as the master led him from the cell. The attendants did not note the difference.

Harlow turned to me just before the door clanged.

"The change is but for a short time," he whispered. "Have no fear, my friend. I will return for you soon."

THEY are ready for me. Five minutes from now my soul will be separated from Schwengel's body in accordance with the law's decrees. They will lead me to the scaffold just outside and there they will hang me by the neck until I am dead. My face will turn a purplish black and grow swollen just as Dryson's face did that night I saw him strangled in

the doorway. And once separated from my soul's abiding-place there will be no help for me. Even the power of Harlow can not then bring me back to earth. I am going to my Maker to be judged. God, what a lot of sins I must atone for!

I am writing this so that others will be warned. Let the world know what a foul beast Harlow is. Let the world know how he tricked me. Let the newspapers broadcast it from coast to coast. . . .

I hear them coming down the corridor. As I look through the barred window I can see a small group of men in the enclosure outside waiting for me. I am to be the star of the tragedy. How they will gape when I step upon the stage! I must write fast.

Harlow has failed me. . . .

But has he? God! Oh, God! I feel his power surging over me. . . . He is calling me. I must go. I must go. Harlow, master of my soul, commands me to come. Harlow——

* * * * *

(From Prison City News)

WEIRD MIXUP IN PRISON ESCAPE

Supposed Dead Man Leaps From Morgue Slab and Is Spirited Away in Closed Car

GOVERNOR ORDERS INVESTIGATION

Legislative Committee to Act Immediately—Physicians Declare Themselves Baffled

A supposedly dead man escaped from the prison morgue this morning in one of the most sensational and weird prison breaks ever known. Two guards and one trusty are in the prison hospital as a result of the affair; all three on the verge of a mental breakdown. Warden Muckridge is making every effort to recapture the escaped man. A dozen armed posses are scouring the countryside, they, with the prison guards engaged in the chase, making over three hundred men hunting for the escaped man.

The affair is clouded in mystery. Warden Muckridge issued a statement to the press which is, substantially, as follows:

Yesterday one of the convicts, James Sanders, sent up from San Merino county for forgery, was stabbed and supposedly killed by Thomas Conners, his cell mate. The latter had smuggled a knife into the cell and, during an argument with Sanders, drew it from its hiding-place before the guards could separate them, plunging it into the latter's heart.

The body of Sanders was taken to the prison morgue, where a post-mortem was performed by Doctor John B. Cameron, the prison physician, assisted by Doctors Wunderlich and Shively of this city. Their finding was to the effect that the point of the weapon penetrated the left ventricle, death being instantaneous.

Condemned Man Dies

Oscar Schwengel, the murderer, was to have been hanged at five-thirty o'clock this morning. Omar Mansard, morgue attendant, and Randall Ashton, another guard, together with Wilson Mann, a trusty, who act as his assistants, were making preparations in the morgue for the reception of the body.

Just as the prison bell rang at 5:30, the usual breakfast hour, Schwengel dropped dead, the result, according to the prison physician, of shock brought on by the fear of execution. He had been engaged up to the very last in writing what purported to be the story of his life. Examination proves it to be a weird, rambling statement in which he claimed to be one Hubert Van Gilder whose soul, according to the story, was confined within the body of Schwengel by Doctor Peter Dryson,

the eminent specialist on mental disorders who attracted so much attention a few weeks ago when he inherited a million dollars from the late Antone Loman, whose reason he saved.

Doctor Dryson recently visited Schwengel for the purpose of studying his mental condition, which undoubtedly accounts for the use of his name by the condemned man. Schwengel, in his statement, accuses Doctor Dryson of being one Doctor Horatio Harlow. That the man was deranged there is now not a doubt.

Dead Man Comes to Life

Here, however, is where the weird part of the story comes in. Coincident with the ringing of the prison bell and the sudden death of Schwengel, Sanders, the man lying naked on the morgue slab to all appearances dead, leaped to his feet with a ringing shriek.

"Harlow has kept his word!" Mansard, Ashton and Mann, the morgue attendants, assert that he shouted. Then: "I come, Master! I come!"

Naked, with the gaping wound in his chest, he darted through the morgue door and out onto the street. The attendants were too badly frightened to offer any resistance.

Automobile Is Waiting

Just outside the prison gates an automobile with drawn shades was standing with engine running. Just across the street from the morgue, which is outside the prison walls, Alexander O'Connell, a guard stationed in one of the sentry boxes, saw the naked man dash onto the pavement and leap into the machine.

O'Connell fired one shot from his rifle and is certain that the bullet found its mark in the naked body. However, an arm was stretched forth from behind the curtains and the escaping man was pulled into the car, which dashed away at full speed.

O'Connell gave the usual alarm and the siren was sounded. But meanwhile, as is often the case when there is an execution, the convicts became unruly, and by the time order was restored, the machine had disappeared in the distance. Owing to the semi-darkness, Guard O'Connell was unable to obtain the license number.

Dryson Makes Statement

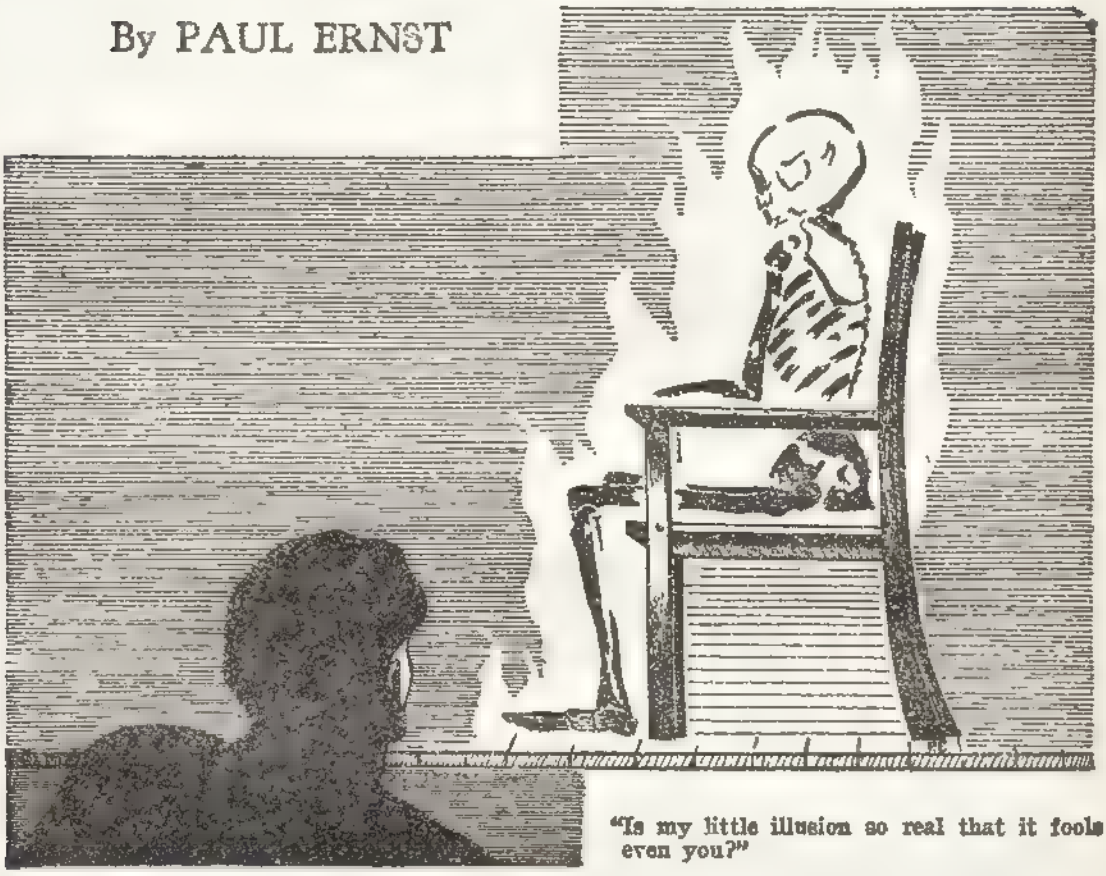
An inquiry sent to Doctor Dryson brings back the reply that he never heard of Hubert Van Gilder, whose name is mentioned in the long screed left by murderer Schwengel. The only time he ever met the latter, he asserts, was on the occasion of his visit to the prison a week ago. He also denies acquaintance with Sanders or any one by the name of Horatio Harlow. The directory of the United States Medical Association fails to give the name of Doctor Harlow as ever having been licensed.

Meanwhile the mystery is: How did James Sanders, stabbed in the heart, manage to hoax three reputable physicians? In spite of what has transpired, all three of the men who performed the post-mortem examination have signed a statement reasserting that Sanders was dead.

Governor Swift has ordered an immediate investigation into the matter by a legislative committee which was appointed at the last session of the state legislature and which has not yet completed its examination into the prison break of a year ago.

The Illusion of Flame

By PAUL ERNST



"Is my little illusion so real that it fools even you?"

A withered stranger from far-off Tibet showed the Great Caprini a bit of terrible magic that made the blood run cold in his veins

BART CAPRINI gave a last touch to the adjustable mirror. He looked toward the miniature stage. His assistant in magic seemed to be standing there. Actually the assistant stood in the wings; only his reflection was realistically to be seen on the small stage.

"Try it again," said Caprini.

The assistant moved in the wings. On the stage the reflected body dropped its right leg. The leg seemed to slough off, to lie like a log on the floor. The man smiled amiably.

Caprini grunted his satisfaction.

"The other leg."

The left leg clattered to the floor with a padded thud. The torso on the stage remained suspended, legless, in empty air. It was a clever stunt.

Caprini looked for flaws and found none. The silence of late night pressed down on the barn of a workroom like the silence of the tomb, but Caprini did not notice. He was too used to working here, late at night, with the city asleep.

"All right," he said to his sassistant, Greer. "We'll call it a day."

The Great Caprini was a short man, stout but amazingly strong, with deft though pudgy fingers. The world's best-

known magician, he looked like a statesman rather than an actor. A cynical statesman, however. None knew so well as he that there was no such thing as magic—that all was trickery and sham.

The Great Caprini relaxed and lit a thin black cigar. The latest illusion was ready. Next season audiences would see a man stand before them and lose his legs and arms, one at a time, to recover them miraculously at a word from Caprini.

"Want a pot of coffee with me before you go home?" he asked his helper.

The assistant, Morton Greer, nodded wordlessly. A singularly silent man, Greer. He was middle-aged, but his face was seamed and his body bent as though he were quite old. In the main a model worker, now and then he disappeared and got terrifically—though still silently—drunk.

He acted as though something in his past continually reached out for him, this wordless, wizened man; as though he had a secret he must continually drown in alcohol. He had been with Caprini for two years, and Caprini still knew nothing of him.

Greer went to the concealed gas range at the rear of the big workshop where Caprini figured out his new illusions. There coffee simmered perpetually in a granite pot.

Greer poured two cups and brought them to a rough table.

"Cigar?" said Caprini.

"Thanks," said Greer, taking one and lighting it.

"Hear of any new tricks anywhere?" asked Caprini.

Greer shook his head.

Caprini sighed, and gazed around. Mirrors, small motors, flexible cables—all the paraphernalia of wizardry as practised on the stage—littered the place.

"I guess we've got all the stunts there are," he said, not bombastically, but with simple pride. He was master of his trade and knew it. "If anybody can show us a new one—hello! How did *you* get in here?"

GREER turned in his chair to see what Caprini was staring at, whom he had spoken to.

A man was standing near the door, behind Greer. He was a curious-looking fellow, tall, emaciated, old. Scant white hair hung down in strings below the brim of an ancient felt hat. His head was like a skull in which black eyes flamed with amazing fires. His skin was burned deep red-brown with ferocious suns, and also was heavily pitted with pock-marks.

"How did you get in here?" repeated Caprini testily. "I locked that door myself."

"A trick," purred the man. His voice was creaky, as if long unused. "I can open any lock. I chose to open this one to startle you into listening to me. For I have an illusion to show you."

Caprini scowled a little. Wherever he went, he was besieged by fools who wanted to show him magic—*real* magic, if you please! Caprini sneered a little.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"It doesn't matter," the emaciated old man creaked.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I watched for you to come in," replied the man calmly. "I have watched for weeks, waiting to catch you and your assistant in this shop."

Something impelled Caprini to look at Greer. He was surprized. His assistant was staring at the lank old man with queerly glassy eyes, and was rigid in his chair, as if he had gone into a trance.

"Hypnotized!" burst out Caprini, gazing at Greer. The world-famous magi-

cian was no longer irritated. "That was well done, my friend! To look at me and—without making a pass—to hypnotize my assistant—that is amazing."

"Thank you." Was there irony in the man's voice? If so, it did not reflect in his face. "I might explain that your assistant is not under an ordinary hypnotic spell. He can comprehend everything said and done about him—but can not act in any way. Isn't that right, my friend?"

The flaming black eyes in the cavernous sockets stared at Greer. Greer stared helplessly back.

"That is right." Greer's voice came hollowly, almost fearfully.

The Great Caprini applauded gently. "You are expert indeed. I suspect you are a professional yourself."

"I was—but not now. Due to various circumstances, I no longer make my living on the stage. But I should like to show you an illusion I have developed since retiring."

Caprini suddenly found that his cigar was out. He had forgotten to draw on it. Not unnatural. This was all highly unusual. It stood out as a highlight in a life filled with the unusual. A man comes through a locked door, hypnotizes your assistant in about ten seconds without once looking at him, and then demonstrates the hypnotic spell as entirely different from any Caprini knew! And the looks of the man! What a fine stage character! The lank white hair, the parchment skin with its innumerable craters, the blazing eyes in the deep skull-sockets!

But Caprini felt a sudden doubt. It seemed as if almost an insane light glowed in the deep-set eyes. Was the fellow a crank after all? A highly expert crank—but still a crank?

"Is the trick you want to show me merely an illusion, or is it real magic?" he asked craftily.

The man smiled, and Caprini felt a tingle in his spine. The smile was disquieting, somehow.

"It is merely an illusion, of course," the harsh voice grated out. "Real magic? Bah! You and I know there is no such thing!"

Caprini sighed with relief.

"Go ahead and show your trick," he said. "I'll be glad to buy it if it is spectacular."

The man's lips moved again in that disquieting smile.

"It is—quite spectacular," he said. "You! Pick up your chair, walk to the little stage, and re-seat yourself there," he commanded Greer.

Greer rose, picked up the chair, and carried it from beside the table to the miniature stage. He sat down there. His eyes . . .

Caprini gazed curiously at his assistant's eyes. They were wide and glazed.

"Why, he looks frightened to death," he said to the unknown old man, who was now standing beside the table where Greer had been sitting a moment ago.

The old man shrugged. "That is merely one of the outward symptoms of this kind of hypnotism," he purred.

Satisfied, Caprini sank back in his chair and waited for the old man to go on.

"I have worked out a rather elaborate little act to go with my illusion—which I call the Illusion of Consuming Flame," the harsh voice creaked out. "You can dispense with the skit if you like, and keep only the illusion. But with your permission I will go through with it now."

"Of course," said the Great Caprini quickly. He was a sincere searcher after the new and bizarre. The chances were a thousand to one that no man could show

him a genuinely new trick. But he was beginning to feel sure that the illusion he was about to witness *might* be that one in a thousand.

THERE was silence for an instant. The big lights glared down on Greer, seated rigidly on the stage with his eyes fixed in that glassy stare so strangely akin to sheer terror; on Caprini, seated by the table watching first his assistant and then the strange old fellow who had so easily opened a locked door; on the old man, dressed in old, almost shabby clothes, with his battered hat still on his head, and his eyes peering out from under the brim like twin black fires.

For a moment Caprini had a feeling that this was all unreal. "I've fallen asleep over my coffee," he said to himself. "In a minute I'll wake up and find Greer across the table from me, and no one else here."

The grating voice jerked him back to reality.

"Keep watching the man on the stage, Caprini. After it is over you can learn the mechanics of the illusion, if you are capable."

Caprini raised his eyebrows good-humoredly. If you are capable! *That* to *him!*

He heard the old man moving behind him, and assumed he was adjusting mirrors there. He started to tell the man that the mirrors in the wings of the small stage might be more convenient, but stopped himself. Let the fellow handle things in his own way.

The man's voice grated out.

"The theme of the little skit accompanying the illusion is this:

"A magician, playing the second-rate houses, has a fine-looking young assistant —and a lovely wife. The three get along very well for a time. Then the assistant, who is much younger and better-looking than the magician, looks more than twice at his employer's wife. The woman becomes infatuated with him. They begin plotting against the husband—at least the assistant does. The woman agrees only after much persuasion, half realizing that she is more than a little mad under the spell of her infatuation. . . . You understand all I am saying, Greer?"

On the stage the man nodded his head like a mechanical doll. His eyes were enormous.

"I understand," he said hollowly.

Caprini shifted in his chair.

"Why——" he began.

"This is all part of the skit," came the creaking voice behind him. "You will understand my occasional remarks to your assistant as we go along."

Caprini settled back, leaving unasked the second question in his mind: how it was that the man behind him knew Greer's name.

"The assistant," the old man's voice went on, "decided that he knew all his employer's tricks and could perform them himself. And by getting rid of the man he could at one stroke steal his act and his wife. So—he got rid of him."

"I don't quite see how all this could be made into a skit," said Caprini, thoughtfully.

"It would have to be shortened and whipped into shape," came the creaking voice, in suave agreement. "But let me go on:

"The assistant waited till their act was billed on the San Francisco stage before striking. This was because he was too cowardly for murder. He preferred to hire two sailors from a dope-smuggling Chinese boat to shanghai his employer and take him back to China, or kill him on the way and dump his body overboard. . . . Which was it to be, Greer?"

Greer's hollow voice came thinly. "He was to be killed on the way."

"All part of the act, Caprini," the grating voice came as Caprini moved restlessly in his chair again. "All part of the act. You can eliminate it in the future, if you like."

Caprini heard something like a match being struck, but he continued to gaze ahead of him, at his assistant on the stage.

"The next part of the act will have to be worked very carefully and quickly. Perhaps it can be done by shifting scenery. Anyhow, picture to yourself a miserable, pock-marked opium slave being taken into an obscure Tibetan monastery. That is what the shanghaied magician has become, and that, after sickness and wandering, was where he was given refuge. He entertains the priests with a display of his cheap, mechanical wizardry. They laugh, and one of them teaches him, in a moment of idleness, a bit of *real* magic. . . . Only in the play, Caprini. Only in the play. You and I know there is no such thing. Eh? But it should go well with an audience."

Caprini saw a reflection of a small, flickering flame.

"Careful," he said quickly. "Don't set the place afire."

"I have only a few dried weeds burning in one of your big copper pots," the old man replied. He went on.

"THE scene changes," he said. There was a crisp new note in his voice, and Caprini had the sudden conviction that the man was not so old as he looked. Sickness, or something else, had aged him prematurely, that was all.

"The second-rate magician is back in this country with his new trick, which he learned from the Tibetan priest. Only this is not a trick. It is actual wizardry. . . . You hear, Greer? Actual wizardry. You will begin to feel it in a moment."

Into the creaking voice crept a note of savagery; and at the same instant Greer's eyes grew yet more terror-filled. Caprini nodded his head a little. The skit *might* go, at that. It would require acting as well as deftness. Well, he, the Great Caprini, could act. And Greer could be taught the frozen horror of expression he was now assuming under the peculiar form of hypnotism practised by this amazing old man.

"The magician hunts up his ex-assistant. He discovers that the man has deserted the stolen wife, and that the woman has died. The assistant is now trying the act alone and slowly failing. He is expert, but not quite expert enough to perform the illusions. He does not recognize the man he has wronged, and grasps at that man's offer to teach him some new tricks. . . . Do you begin to feel it, Greer?"

The voice of the man on the stage sounded cavernously.

"I begin to feel it."

"But you can make no move to escape?"

"I can make no move to escape."

Caprini felt the odd little tingle in his spine again. Untold suffering had seemed to reflect in his assistant's voice. For perhaps two seconds he found himself wondering if there were not, after all, possible implications in this queer act being performed for him. But he put this thought down promptly. To wonder about such a thing was to put himself in a class with the fools in his audiences who believed all they saw and heard.

"As soon as he gets his ex-assistant alone," the savage, creaking voice went on, "he performs on him the Tibetan priest's magic, the Illusion of Consuming Flame. But the audience, Caprini, which

will be breathlessly watching the climax of the little skit as you are watching now, will be solemnly assured that it is *not* an illusion. And since the act is designed to end the performance, the descending curtain can carry out the pretense."

The description of Caprini's staring as "breathless watching" was a true one. For now the master magician was bending forward in his chair with his eyes riveted to his assistant.

The man had begun to *glow!* A bizarre word to apply to a human body, but as precise as any other word. Greer, from head to foot, was *glowing* faintly, as though he had been smeared with phosphorescent paint. His clothes slowly were disappearing, as though dissolving in liquid green flames. Soon his naked body, with green fire waving lambently over every inch of it, showed in the chair.

"That is the great trick the unfortunate magician learned in the Tibetan fastness: how to consume a man in slow fire without once touching him. And the man, meanwhile, feels all the pangs of slow death by burning. . . . Don't you, Greer?"

The lips of the naked figure on the stage moved. Small green flames moved with them.

"Don't you?" purred the man behind Caprini.

"Yes . . . *yes!*"

The words seemed wrenched from the flaming lips. And Caprini knew sudden fear.

"Say — you're not really hurting him, are you?"

There was a grating laugh.

"Hurting him? Really hurting him? Such a question for the Great Caprini to ask! Is my little illusion so real, then, that it fools even you?"

Caprini returned his undivided attention to the marvelous illusion being performed on the stage. He was angry at himself. He, who had done things almost like this since he was a boy—to be half convinced that he was looking at reality when the reality was patently impossible!

"Such is the skit, Caprini, which ought to go with the Illusion of Consuming Flame. There before the eyes of the audience, the man takes his revenge. He burns his betrayer into nothingness, by real magic. A good touch to convince a public that is growing all too cynical, don't you think?"

Caprini said nothing. In profound admiration for the old man's skill and trickery, he was staring at Greer.

Greer was now a skeleton. That is, it *looked* as if he were only a skeleton. As the envelope of his clothes had dissolved seemingly in the consuming green flames, so now the envelope of his flesh had melted like slow mist, to reveal only the skeleton seated on the chair on the stage. But still the skeleton smoldered soundlessly in the green fire. Still the lambent flame licked languidly at it. The skeleton faded slowly to reveal the faintly shining "second skeleton"—the phantom structure of silicon and mineral matter, sometimes revealed in an X-ray picture, which mingles with the bony structure of the human frame.

Then there was nothing. The chair was empty. Morton Greer had apparently been consumed entirely by impossible fire before Caprini's eyes.

THE Great Caprini was a just man. He knew when he had met a peer. And he knew that he had met one now. With all his profound knowledge of practical physics, chemistry, electricity, and optical phenomena, he hadn't the faintest

idea how this thing had been done—or, rather, made to look as if it were done.

"Superb!" he exclaimed, turning in his chair to gaze at the old man and learn now how this thing was performed. "It was astounding——"

He stopped, feeling more than a little foolish.

There was no man behind him. The old man had gone—disappeared into thin air, a layman would have said. But the Great Caprini only swore and raced for the door. The old fool! Why had he left in such theatrical mystery? He must have displayed the agility of a young athlete to reach the door so quickly. Why? Caprini wanted to buy the act.

The door, he found, was locked. So the old man incredibly had managed to go out, and lock the door after him, in that short space of time since Caprini had last heard his voice!

Caprini fairly tore the door open and leaned over the banister.

"Say!" he shouted urgently. "Say, you! Come back! I'll give you anything in reason for the trick!"

There was no answer. There was no sound of footsteps. Caprini went down the stairs two at a time. The old man was not on the staircase.

Slowly Caprini came back up. It seemed impossible that the fellow could have got away by the stairs so quickly. . . .

He shrugged. How else could he have got away?

Cursing a little, Caprini re-entered the workshop. He had the annoying conviction that he would never be able to figure out the Illusion of Consuming Flame by himself. But perhaps Greer, in the queer hypnotic trance that had seemed to lock his muscles while leaving his mind free, had observed enough of the man's actions behind Caprini to have some inkling of how the thing had been done.

Caprini had expected to come back and see Greer seated on the chair again, possibly still in the curious trance. But his assistant was nowhere in sight. In the recess beside the miniature stage, perhaps?

"Greer."

There was no answer. Damn it! Had Greer been too deeply hypnotized to observe anything when he slid off the chair and the illusion of the flaming skeleton was substituted before Caprini's eyes?

"Greer!"

Caprini went quickly to the stage. Greer was nowhere in the recess beside it. He shook the empty chair impatiently, as though in the insensate wood might lie an answer to the mechanics of the illusion and to his assistant's childish hiding.

Then he stared at the chair. Covering its seat was a film of grayish dust.

The large vein in Caprini's throat began to pulse heavily. He moistened dry lips. As though of its own accord, his hand went out and down. His forefinger stirred the film of dust.

But the film was not dust.

"Greer!" whimpered the Great Caprini. The whimper rose to a shriek which echoed and re-echoed in the lofty, terribly silent workshop. *"Greer! For God's sake—where are you?"*

"Below him the ground was festering with gigantic Dholes."

Through the Gates of the Silver Key

By H. P. LOVECRAFT and E. HOFFMANN PRICE

A colossal story of cosmic scope by two of the greatest writers of weird fiction in the world today

CHAPTER 1

IN A vast room hung with strangely figured arras and carpeted with Boukhara rugs of impressive age and workmanship, four men were sitting around a document-strown table. From the far corners, where odd tripods of wrought iron were now and then replenished by an incredibly aged negro in somber livery, came the hypnotic fumes of olibanum; while in a deep niche on one side there ticked a curious, coffin-shaped clock whose dial bore baffling hieroglyphs and whose four hands did not move in consonance with any time system known on this planet. It was a singular and disturbing room, but well fitted to the business then at hand. For there, in the New

Orleans home of this continent's greatest mystic, mathematician and orientalist, there was being settled at last the estate of a scarcely less great mystic, scholar, author and dreamer who had vanished from the face of the earth four years before.

Randolph Carter, who had all his life sought to escape from the tedium and limitations of waking reality in the beckoning vistas of dreams and fabled avenues of other dimensions, disappeared from the sight of man on the seventh of October, 1928, at the age of fifty-four. His career had been a strange and lonely one, and there were those who inferred from his curious novels many episodes more bizarre than any in his recorded history. His association with Harley Warren, the South Carolina mystic whose studies in the primal Naacal language of the Himalayan priests had led to such outrageous conclusions, had been close. Indeed, it was he who—one mist-mad, terrible night in an ancient graveyard—had seen Warren descend into a dank and nitrous vault, never to emerge. Carter lived in Boston, but it was from the wild, haunted hills behind hoary and witch-accursed Arkham that all his forebears had come. And it was amid these ancient, cryptically brooding hills that he had ultimately vanished.

His old servant, Parks—who died early in 1930—had spoken of the strangely aromatic and hideously carven box he had found in the attic, and of the undecipherable parchments and queerly figured silver key which that box had contained: matters of which Carter had also written to others. Carter, he said, had told him that this key had come down from his ancestors, and that it would help him to unlock the gates to his lost boyhood, and to strange dimensions and fantastic realms which he had hitherto visited only in vague, brief and elusive dreams. Then one day Carter took the box and its contents and rode away in his car, never to return.

● "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," published complete in this issue, is an utterly amazing novelette. It is much more than a mere piece of fiction, for it so far transcends human experiences, and even the wildest dreams of human beings, that the ideas and thoughts set forth in the tale are titanic. One searches the dictionaries in vain for words to describe this brilliant and astounding tale, which for sheer imaginative daring goes beyond anything ever printed before. It is the joint product of two of your most popular authors.

Later on, people found the car at the side of an old, grass-grown road in the hills behind crumbling Arkham—the hills where Carter's forebears had once dwelt, and where the ruined cellar of the great Carter homestead still gaped to the sky. It was in a grove of tall elms near by that another of the Carters had mysteriously vanished in 1781, and not far away was the half-rotted cottage where Goody Fowler, the witch, had brewed her ominous potions still earlier. The region had been settled in 1692 by fugitives from the witchcraft trials in Salem, and even now it bore a name for vaguely ominous things scarcely to be envisaged. Edmund Carter had fled from the shadow of Gallows Hill just in time, and the tales of his sorceries were many. Now, it seemed, his lone descendant had gone somewhere to join him!

In the car they found the hideously carved box of fragrant wood, and the parchment which no man could read. The silver key was gone—presumably

with Carter. Further than that there was no certain clue. Detectives from Boston said that the fallen timbers of the old Carter place seemed oddly disturbed, and somebody found a handkerchief on the rock-ridged, sinisterly wooded slope behind the ruins near the dreaded cave called the Snake Den.

It was then that the country legends about the Snake Den gained a new vitality. Farmers whispered of the blasphemous uses to which old Edmund Carter the wizard had put that horrible grotto, and added later tales about the fondness which Randolph Carter himself had had for it when a boy. In Carter's boyhood the venerable gambrel-roofed homestead was still standing and tenanted by his great-uncle Christopher. He had visited there often, and had talked singularly about the Snake Den. People remembered what he had said about a deep fissure and an unknown inner cave beyond, and speculated on the change he had shown after spending one whole memorable day in the cavern when he was nine. That was in October, too—and ever after that he had seemed to have an uncanny knack at prophesying future events.

IT HAD rained late in the night that Carter vanished, and no one was quite able to trace his footprints from the car. Inside the Snake Den all was amorphous liquid mud, owing to the copious seepage. Only the ignorant rustics whispered about the prints they thought they spied where the great elms overhang the road, and on the sinister hillside near the Snake Den, where the handkerchief was found. Who could pay attention to whispers that spoke of stubby little tracks like those which Randolph Carter's square-toed boots made when he was a small boy? It was as crazy a notion as that other whisper—that the tracks of old Benijah Corey's peculiar heelless boots had met the stubby little tracks in the road. Old Benijah had been the Carters' hired man when Randolph was young; but he had died thirty years ago.

It must have been these whispers—plus Carter's own statement to Parks and others that the queerly arabesqued silver key would help him unlock the gates of his lost boyhood—which caused a number of mystical students to declare that the missing man had actually doubled back on the trail of time and returned through forty-five years to that other October day in 1883 when he had stayed in the Snake Den as a small boy. When he came out that night, they argued, he had somehow made the whole trip to 1928 and back; for did he not thereafter know of things which were to happen later? And yet he had never spoken of anything to happen after 1928.

One student—an elderly eccentric of Providence, Rhode Island, who had enjoyed a long and close correspondence with Carter—had a still more elaborate theory, and believed that Carter had not only returned to boyhood, but achieved a further liberation, roving at will through the prismatic vistas of boyhood dream. After a strange vision this man published a tale of Carter's vanishing in which he hinted that the lost one now reigned as king on the opal throne of Ilek-Vad, that fabulous town of turrets atop the hollow cliffs of glass overlooking the twilight sea wherein the bearded and finny Gnorri build their singular labyrinths.

It was this old man, Ward Phillips, who pleaded most loudly against the apportionment of Carter's estate to his heirs—all distant cousins—on the ground that he was still alive in another time-dimension and might well return some day. Against him was arrayed the legal talent of one of the cousins, Ernest K. Aspin-

wall of Chicago, a man ten years Carter's senior, but keen as a youth in forensic battles. For four years the contest had raged, but now the time for apportionment had come, and this vast, strange room in New Orleans was to be the scene of the arrangements.

It was the home of Carter's literary and financial executor—the distinguished Creole student of mysteries and Eastern antiquities, Etienne-Laurent de Marigny. Carter had met de Marigny during the war, when they both served in the French Foreign Legion, and had at once cleaved to him because of their similar tastes and outlook. When, on a memorable joint furlough, the learned young Creole had taken the wistful Boston dreamer to Bayonne, in the south of France, and had shown him certain terrible secrets in the nighted and immemorial crypts that burrow beneath that brooding, eon-weighted city, the friendship was for ever sealed. Carter's will had named de Marigny as executor, and now that avid scholar was reluctantly presiding over the settlement of the estate. It was sad work for him, for like the old Rhode Islander he did not believe that Carter was dead. But what weight have the dreams of mystics against the harsh wisdom of the world?

AROUND the table in that strange room in the old French Quarter sat the men who claimed an interest in the proceedings. There had been the usual legal advertisements of the conference in papers wherever Carter's heirs were thought to live; yet only four now sat listening to the abnormal ticking of that coffin-shaped clock which told no earthly time, and to the bubbling of the courtyard fountain beyond half-curtained, fan-lighted windows. As the hours wore on, the faces of the four were half shrouded in the curling fumes from the tripods, which, piled recklessly with fuel, seemed to need less and less attention from the silently gliding and increasingly nervous old negro.

There was Etienne de Marigny himself—slim, dark, handsome, mustached, and still young. Aspinwall, representing the heirs, was white-haired, apoplectic-faced, side-whiskered, and portly. Phillips, the Providence mystic, was lean, gray, long-nosed, clean-shaven, and stoop-shouldered. The fourth man was non-committal in age—lean, with a dark, bearded, singularly immobile face of very regular contour, bound with the turban of a high-caste Brahman and having night-black, burning, almost irisless eyes which seemed to gaze out from a vast distance behind the features. He had announced himself as the Swami Chandraputra, an adept from Benares, with important information to give; and both de Marigny and Phillips—who had corresponded with him—had been quick to recognize the genuineness of his mystical pretensions. His speech had an oddly forced, hollow, metallic quality, as if the use of English taxed his vocal apparatus; yet his language was as easy, correct and idiomatic as any native Anglo-Saxon's. In general attire he was the normal European civilian, but his loose clothes sat peculiarly badly on him, while his bushy black beard, Eastern turban, and large, white mittens gave him an air of exotic eccentricity.

De Marigny, fingering the parchment found in Carter's car, was speaking.

"No, I have not been able to make anything of the parchment. Mr. Phillips, here, also gives it up. Colonel Churchward declares it is not Naacal, and it looks nothing at all like the hieroglyphics on that Easter Island war-club. The carvings on that box, though, do strongly suggest Easter Island images.

The nearest thing I can recall to these parchment characters—notice how all the letters seem to hang down from horizontal word-bars—is the writing in a book poor Harley Warren once had. It came from India while Carter and I were visiting him in 1919, and he never would tell us anything about it—said it would be better if we didn't know, and hinted that it might have come originally from some place other than the Earth. He took it with him in December, when he went down into the vault in that old graveyard—but neither he nor the book ever came to the surface again. Some time ago I sent our friend here—the Swami Chandraputra—a memory-sketch of some of those letters, and also a photostatic copy of the Carter parchment. He believes he may be able to shed light on them after certain references and consultations.

"But the key—Carter sent me a photograph of that. Its curious arabesques were not letters, but seem to have belonged to the same culture-tradition as the parchment. Carter always spoke of being on the point of solving the mystery, though he never gave details. Once he grew almost poetic about the whole business. That antique silver key, he said, would unlock the successive doors that bar our free march down the mighty corridors of space and time to the very Border which no man has crossed since Shaddad with his terrific genius built and concealed in the sands of Arabia Petræa the prodigious domes and uncounted minarets of thousand-pillared Irem. Half-starved darvishes—wrote Carter—and thirst-crazed nomads have returned to tell of that monumental portal, and of the hand that is sculptured above the keystone of the arch, but no man has passed and retraced his steps to say that his footprints on the garnet-strown sands within bear witness to his visit. The key, he surmised, was that for which the cyclopean sculptured hand vainly grasps.

"Why Carter didn't take the parchment as well as the key, we can not say. Perhaps he forgot it—or perhaps he forbore to take it through recollection of one who had taken a book of like characters into a vault and never returned. Or perhaps it was really immaterial to what he wished to do."

As de Marigny paused, old Mr. Phillips spoke in a harsh, shrill voice.

"We can know of Randolph Carter's wandering only what we dream. I have been to many strange places in dreams, and have heard many strange and significant things in Ulthar, beyond the River Skai. It does not appear that the parchment was needed, for certainly Carter reentered the world of his boyhood dreams, and is now a king in Ilek-Vad."

Mr. Aspinwall grew doubly apoplectic-looking as he sputtered: "Can't somebody shut that old fool up? We've had enough of these moonings. The problem is to divide the property, and it's about time we got to it."

For the first time Swami Chandraputra spoke in his queerly alien voice.

"Gentlemen, there is more to this matter than you think. Mr. Aspinwall does not do well to laugh at the evidence of dreams. Mr. Phillips has taken an incomplete view—perhaps because he has not dreamed enough. I, myself, have done much dreaming. We in India have always done that, just as all the Carters seem to have done it. You, Mr. Aspinwall, as a maternal cousin, are naturally not a Carter. My own dreams, and certain other sources of information, have told me a great deal which you still find obscure. For example, Randolph Carter forgot that parchment which he couldn't decipher—yet it would have been well for him had he remembered to take it. You see, I have

really learned pretty much what happened to Carter after he left his car with the silver key at sunset on that seventh of October, four years ago."

Aspinwall audibly sneered, but the others sat up with heightened interest. The smoke from the tripods increased, and the crazy ticking of that coffin-shaped clock seemed to fall into bizarre patterns like the dots and dashes of some alien and insoluble telegraph message from outer space. The Hindoo leaned back, half closed his eyes, and continued in that oddly labored yet idiomatic speech, while before his audience there began to float a picture of what had happened to Randolph Carter.

CHAPTER 2

THE hills beyond Arkham are full of a strange magic—something, perhaps, which the old wizard Edmund Carter called down from the stars and up from the crypts of nether earth when he fled there from Salem in 1692. As soon as Randolph Carter was back among them he knew that he was close to one of the gates which a few audacious, abhorred and alien-souled men have blasted through titan walls betwixt the world and the outside absolute. Here, he felt, and on this day of the year, he could carry out with success the message he had deciphered months before from the arabesques of that tarnished and incredibly ancient silver key. He knew now how it must be rotated, and how it must be held up to the setting sun, and what syllables of ceremony must be intoned into the void at the ninth and last turning. In a spot as close to a dark polarity and induced gate as this, it could not fail in its primary functions. Certainly, he would rest that night in the lost boyhood for which he had never ceased to mourn.

He got out of the car with the key in his pocket, walking up-hill deeper and deeper into the shadowy core of that brooding, haunted countryside of winding road, vine-grown stone wall, black woodland, gnarled, neglected orchard, gaping-windowed, deserted farmhouse, and nameless ruin. At the sunset hour, when the distant spires of Kingsport gleamed in the ruddy blaze, he took out the key and made the needed turnings and intonations. Only later did he realize how soon the ritual had taken effect.

Then in the deepening twilight he had heard a voice out of the past: Old Benijah Corey, his great-uncle's hired man. Had not old Benijah been dead for thirty years? Thirty years before *when?* What was time? Where had he been? Why was it strange that Benijah should be calling him on this seventh of October, 1883? Was he not out later than Aunt Martha had told him to stay? What was this key in his blouse pocket, where his little telescope—given him by his father on his ninth birthday, two months before—ought to be? Had he found it in the attic at home? Would it unlock the mystic pylon which his sharp eye had traced amidst the jagged rocks at the back of that inner cave behind the Snake Den on the hill? That was the place they always coupled with old Edmund Carter the wizard. People wouldn't go there, and nobody but him had ever noticed or squirmed through the root-choked fissure to that great black inner chamber with the pylon. Whose hands had carved that hint of a pylon out of the living rock? Old Wizard Edmund's—or *others* that he had conjured up and commanded?

That evening little Randolph ate supper with Uncle Chris and Aunt Martha in the old gambrel-roofed farmhouse.

Next morning he was up early and out through the twisted-boughed apple orchard to the upper timber-lot where the

mouth of the Snake Den lurked black and forbidding amongst grotesque, overnourished oaks. A nameless expectancy was upon him, and he did not even notice the loss of his handkerchief as he fumbled in his blouse pocket to see if the queer silver key was safe. He crawled through the dark orifice with tense, adventurous assurance, lighting his way with matches taken from the sitting-room. In another moment he had wriggled through the root-choked fissure at the farther end, and was in the vast, unknown inner grotto whose ultimate rock wall seemed half like a monstrous and consciously shapen pylon. Before that dank, dripping wall he stood silent and awestruck, lighting one match after another as he gazed. Was that stony bulge above the keystone of the imagined arch really a gigantic sculptured hand? Then he drew forth the silver key, and made motions and intonations whose source he could only dimly remember. Was anything forgotten? He knew only that he wished to cross the barrier to the untrammelled land of his dreams and the gulfs where all dimensions dissolved in the absolute.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT happened then is scarcely to be described in words. It is full of those paradoxes, contradictions and anomalies which have no place in waking life, but which fill our more fantastic dreams and are taken as matters of course till we return to our narrow, rigid, objective world of limited causation and tri-dimensional logic. As the Hindoo continued his tale, he had difficulty in avoiding what seemed—even more than the notion of a man transferred through the years to boyhood—an air of trivial, puerile extravagance. Mr. Aspinwall, in disgust, gave an apoplectic snort and virtually stopped listening.

For the rite of the silver key, as practised by Randolph Carter in that black, haunted cave within a cave, did not prove unavailing. From the first gesture and syllable an aura of strange, awesome mutation was apparent—a sense of incalculable disturbance and confusion in time and space, yet one which held no hint of what we recognize as motion and duration. Imperceptibly, such things as age and location ceased to have any significance whatever. The day before, Randolph Carter had miraculously leaped a gulf of years. Now there was no distinction between boy and man. There was only the entity Randolph Carter, with a certain store of images which had lost all connection with terrestrial scenes and circumstances of acquisition. A moment before, there had been an inner cave with vague suggestions of a monstrous arch and gigantic sculptured hand on the farther wall. Now there was neither cave nor absence of cave; neither wall nor absence of wall. There was only a flux of impressions not so much visual as cerebral, amidst which the entity that was Randolph Carter experienced perceptions or registrations of all that his mind revolved on, yet without any clear consciousness of the way in which he received them.

By the time the rite was over, Carter knew that he was in no region whose place could be told by Earth's geographers, and in no age whose date history could fix; for the nature of what was happening was not wholly unfamiliar to him. There were hints of it in the cryptical Pnakotic fragments, and a whole chapter in the forbidden *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, had taken on significance when he had deciphered the designs graven on the silver key. A gate had been unlocked—not, indeed, the Ultimate Gate, but one lead-

ing from Earth and time to that extension of Earth which is outside time, and from which in turn the Ultimate Gate leads fearsomely and perilously to the Last Void which is outside all earths, all universes, and all matter.

There would be a Guide—and a very terrible one; a Guide who had been an entity of Earth millions of years before, when man was undreamed of, and when forgotten shapes moved on a steaming planet building strange cities among whose last, crumbling ruins the first mammals were to play. Carter remembered what the monstrous *Necronomicon* had vaguely and disconcertingly adumbrated concerning that Guide:

"And while there are those," the mad Arab had written, *"who have dared to seek glimpses beyond the Veil, and to accept HIM as guide, they would have been more prudent had they avoided commerce with HIM; for it is written in the Book of Thoth how terrific is the price of a single glimpse. Nor may those who pass ever return, for in the vastnesses transcending our world are shapes of darkness that seize and bind. The Affair that shambleth about in the night, the evil that defieth the Elder Sign, the Herd that stand watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have, and that thrive on that which groweth out of the tenants thereof: —all these Blacknesses are lesser than HE WHO guardeth the Gateway: HE WHO will guide the rash one beyond all the worlds into the Abyss of unnamable devourers. For HE is 'UMR AT-TAWIL, the Most Ancient One, which the scribe rendereth as THE PROLONGED OF LIFE."*

Memory and imagination shaped dim half-pictures with uncertain outlines amidst the seething chaos, but Carter knew that they were of memory and imagination only. Yet he felt that it was not chance which built these things in his consciousness, but rather some vast reality, ineffable and undimensioned, which surrounded him and strove to translate itself into the only symbols he was capable of grasping. For no mind of Earth may grasp the extensions of shape which interweave in the oblique gulfs outside time and the dimensions we know.

There floated before Carter a cloudy pageantry of shapes and scenes which he somehow linked with Earth's primal, eon-forgotten past. Monstrous living things moved deliberately through vistas of fantastic handiwork that no sane dream ever held, and landscapes bore incredible vegetation and cliffs and mountains and masonry of no human pattern. There were cities under the sea, and denizens thereof; and towers in great deserts where globes and cylinders and nameless winged entities shot off into space, or hurtled down out of space. All this Carter grasped, though the images bore no fixed relation to one another or to him. He himself had no stable form or position, but only such shifting hints of form and position as his whirling fancy supplied.

He had wished to find the enchanted regions of his boyhood dreams, where galleys sail up the river Oukranos past the gilded spires of Thran, and elephant caravans tramp through perfumed jungles in Kled, beyond forgotten palaces with veined ivory columns that sleep lovely and unbroken under the moon. Now, intoxicated with wider visions, he scarcely knew what he sought. Thoughts of infinite and blasphemous daring rose in his mind, and he knew he would face the dreaded Guide without fear, asking monstrous and terrible things of him.

All at once the pageant of impressions seemed to achieve a vague kind of sta-

bilization. There were great masses of towering stone, carven into alien and incomprehensible designs and disposed according to the laws of some unknown, inverse geometry. Light filtered down from a sky of no assignable color in baffling, contradictory directions, and played almost sentiently over what seemed to be a curved line of gigantic hieroglyphed pedestals more hexagonal than otherwise, and surmounted by cloaked, ill-defined shapes.

There was another shape, too, which occupied no pedestal, but which seemed to glide or float over the cloudy, floor-like lower level. It was not exactly permanent in outline, but held transient suggestions of something remotely preceding or paralleling the human form, though half as large again as an ordinary man. It seemed to be heavily cloaked, like the shapes on the pedestals, with some neutral-colored fabric; and Carter could not detect any eye-holes through which it might gaze. Probably it did not need to gaze, for it seemed to belong to an order of beings far outside the merely physical in organization and faculties.

A moment later Carter knew that this was so, for the Shape had spoken to his mind without sound or language. And though the name it uttered was a dreaded and terrible one, Randolph Carter did not flinch in fear. Instead, he spoke back, equally without sound or language, and made those obeisances which the hideous *Necronomicon* had taught him to make. For this shape was nothing less than that which all the world has feared since Lomar rose out of the sea, and the Children of the Fire Mist came to Earth to teach the Elder Lore to man. It was indeed the frightful Guide and Guardian of the Gate—'UMR AT-TAWIL, the ancient one, which the scribe rendereth the PROLONGED OF LIFE.

The Guide knew, as he knew all things, of Carter's quest and coming, and that this seeker of dreams and secrets stood before him unafraid. There was no horror or malignity in what he radiated, and Carter wondered for a moment whether the mad Arab's terrific blasphemous hints came from envy and a baffled wish to do what was now about to be done. Or perhaps the Guide reserved his horror and malignity for those who feared. As the radiations continued, Carter eventually interpreted them in the form of words.

"I AM indeed that Most Ancient One," said the Guide, "of whom you know. We have awaited you—the Ancient Ones and I. You are welcome, even though long delayed. You have the key, and have unlocked the First Gate. Now the Ultimate Gate is ready for your trial. If you fear, you need not advance. You may still go back unharmed, the way you came. But if you choose to advance——"

The pause was ominous, but the radiations continued to be friendly. Carter hesitated not a moment, for a burning curiosity drove him on.

"I will advance," he radiated back, "and I accept you as my Guide."

At this reply the Guide seemed to make a sign by certain motions of his robe which may or may not have involved the lifting of an arm or some homologous member. A second sign followed, and from his well-learned lore Carter knew that he was at last very close to the Ultimate Gate. The light now changed to another inexplicable color, and the shapes on the quasi-hexagonal pedestals became more clearly defined. As they sat more erect, their outlines became more like those of men, though Carter knew that they could not be men. Upon their cloaked heads there now seemed to rest tall, uncertainly colored miters, strangely

suggestive of those on certain nameless figures chiselled by a forgotten sculptor along the living cliffs of a high, forbidden mountain in Tartary; while grasped in certain folds of their swathings were long scepters whose carven heads bodied forth a grotesque and archaic mystery.

Carter guessed what they were and whence they came, and Whom they served; and guessed, too, the price of their service. But he was still content, for at one mighty venture he was to learn all. Damnation, he reflected, is but a word bandied about by those whose blindness leads them to condemn all who can see, even with a single eye. He wondered at the vast conceit of those who had babbled of the *malignant* Ancient Ones, as if They could pause from their everlasting dreams to wreak a wrath on mankind. As well, he thought, might a mammoth pause to visit frantic vengeance on an angleworm. Now the whole assemblage on the vaguely hexagonal pillars was greeting him with a gesture of those oddly carven scepters and radiating a message which he understood:

"We salute you, Most Ancient One, and you, Randolph Carter, whose daring has made you one of us."

Carter saw now that one of the pedestals was vacant, and a gesture of the Most Ancient One told him it was reserved for him. He saw also another pedestal, taller than the rest, and at the center of the oddly curved line—neither semicircle nor ellipse, parabola nor hyperbola—which they formed. This, he guessed, was the Guide's own throne. Moving and rising in a manner hardly definable, Carter took his seat; and as he did so he saw that the Guide had seated himself.

Gradually and mistily it became apparent that the Most Ancient One was holding something—some object clutched in the outflung folds of his robe as if for the sight, or what answered for sight, of the cloaked Companions. It was a large sphere, or apparent sphere, of some obscurely iridescent metal, and as the Guide put it forward a low, pervasive half-impression of *sound* began to rise and fall in intervals which seemed to be rhythmic even though they followed no rhythm of Earth. There was a suggestion of chanting—or what human imagination might interpret as chanting. Presently the quasi-sphere began to grow luminous, and as it gleamed up into a cold, pulsating light of unassignable color, Carter saw that its flickerings conformed to the alien rhythm of the chant. Then all the mitered, scepter-bearing Shapes on the pedestals commenced a slight, curious swaying in the same inexplicable rhythm, while nimbuses of unclassifiable light—resembling that of the quasi-sphere—played around their shrouded heads.

The Hindoo paused in his tale and looked curiously at the tall, coffin-shaped clock with the four hands and hieroglyphed dial, whose crazy ticking followed no known rhythm of Earth.

"You, Mr. de Marigny," he suddenly said to his learned host, "do not need to be told the particularly alien rhythm to which those cowled Shapes on the hexagonal pillars chanted and nodded. You are the only one else—in America—who has had a taste of the Outer Extension. That clock—I suppose it was sent you by the Yogi poor Harley Warren used to talk about—the seer who said that he alone of living men had been to Yian-Ho, the hidden legacy of eon-old Leng, and had borne certain things away from that dreadful and forbidden city. I wonder how many of its subtler properties you know? If my dreams and readings be correct, it was made by those who knew much of the First Gateway. But let me go on with my tale."

AT LAST, continued the Swami, the swaying and the suggestion of chanting ceased, the lambent nimbuses around the now drooping and motionless heads faded, while the cloaked shapes slumped curiously on their pedestals. The quasi-sphere, however, continued to pulsate with inexplicable light. Carter felt that the Ancient Ones were sleeping as they had been when he first saw them, and he wondered out of what cosmic dreams his coming had aroused them. Slowly there filtered into his mind the truth that this strange chanting ritual had been one of instruction, and that the Companions had been chanted by the Most Ancient One into a new and peculiar kind of sleep in order that their dreams might open the Ultimate Gate to which the silver key was a passport. He knew that in the profundity of this deep sleep they were contemplating unplumbed vastnesses of utter and absolute outsideness, and that they were to accomplish that which his presence had demanded.

The Guide did not share this sleep, but seemed still to be giving instructions in some subtle, soundless way. Evidently he was implanting images of those things which he wished the Companions to dream: and Carter knew that as each of the Ancient Ones pictured the prescribed thought, there would be born the nucleus of a manifestation visible to his earthly eyes. When the dreams of all the Shapes had achieved a oneness, that manifestation would occur, and everything he required be materialized, through concentration. He had seen such things on Earth—in India, where the combined, projected will of a circle of adepts can make a thought take tangible substance, and in hoary Atlaanât, of which few even dare speak.

Just what the Ultimate Gate was, and how it was to be passed, Carter could not be certain; but a feeling of tense expectancy surged over him. He was conscious of having a kind of body, and of holding the fateful silver key in his hand. The masses of towering stone opposite him seemed to possess the evenness of a wall, toward the center of which his eyes were irresistibly drawn. And then suddenly he felt the mental currents of the Most Ancient One cease to flow forth.

For the first time Carter realized how terrific utter silence, mental and physical, may be. The earlier moments had never failed to contain some perceptible rhythm, if only the faint, cryptical pulse of the Earth's dimensional extension, but now the hush of the abyss seemed to fall upon everything. Despite his intimations of body, he had no audible breath; and the glow of 'Umr at-Tawil's quasi-sphere had grown petrifiedly fixed and unpulsating. A potent nimbus, brighter than those which had played round the heads of the Shapes, blazed frozenly over the shrouded skull of the terrible Guide.

A dizziness assailed Carter, and his sense of lost orientation waxed a thousandfold. The strange lights seemed to hold the quality of the most impenetrable blacknesses heaped upon blacknesses, while about the Ancient Ones, so close on their pseudo-hexagonal thrones, there hovered an air of the most stupefying remoteness. Then he felt himself wafted into immeasurable depths, with waves of perfumed warmth lapping against his face. It was as if he floated in a torrid, rose-tinctured sea; a sea of drugged wine whose waves broke foaming against shores of brazen fire. A great fear clutched him as he half saw that vast expanse of surging sea lapping against its far-off coast. But the moment of silence was broken—the surgings were speaking to him in a language that was not of physical sound or articulate words.

"The Man of Truth is beyond good and evil," intoned a voice that was not a voice. *"The Man of Truth has ridden to All-Is-One. The Man of Truth has learned that Illusion is the One Reality, and that Substance is the Great Impostor."*

And now, in that rise of masonry to which his eyes had been so irresistibly drawn, there appeared the outline of a titanic arch not unlike that which he thought he had glimpsed so long ago in that cave within a cave, on the far, unreal surface of the three-dimensioned Earth. He realized that he had been using the silver key—moving it in accord with an unlearned and instinctive ritual closely akin to that which had opened the Inner Gate. That rose-drunken sea which lapped his cheeks was, he realized, no more or less than the adamantine mass of the solid wall yielding before his spell, and the vortex of thought with which the Ancient Ones had aided his spell. Still guided by instinct and blind determination, he floated forward—and through the Ultimate Gate.

CHAPTER 4

RANDOLPH CARTER'S advance through that cyclopean bulk of masonry was like a dizzy precipitation through the measureless gulfs between the stars. From a great distance he felt triumphant, godlike surges of deadly sweetness, and after that the rustling of great wings, and impressions of sound like the chirpings and murmurings of objects unknown on Earth or in the solar system. Glancing backward, he saw not one gate alone, but a multiplicity of gates, at some of which clamored Forms he strove not to remember.

And then, suddenly, he felt a greater terror than that which any of the Forms could give—a terror from which he could not flee because it was connected with himself. Even the First Gateway had taken something of stability from him, leaving him uncertain about his bodily form and about his relationship to the mistily defined objects around him, but it had not disturbed his sense of unity. He had still been Randolph Carter, a fixed point in the dimensional seething. Now, beyond the Ultimate Gateway, he realized in a moment of consuming fright that he was not one person, but many persons.

He was in many places at the same time. On Earth, on October 7, 1883, a little boy named Randolph Carter was leaving the Snake Den in the hushed evening light and running down the rocky slope, and through the twisted-boughed orchard toward his Uncle Christopher's house in the hills beyond Arkham; yet at that same moment, which was also somehow in the earthly year of 1928, a vague shadow not less Randolph Carter was sitting on a pedestal among the Ancient Ones in Earth's transdimensional extension. Here, too, was a third Randolph Carter, in the unknown and formless cosmic abyss beyond the Ultimate Gate. And elsewhere, in a chaos of scenes whose infinite multiplicity and monstrous diversity brought him close to the brink of madness, were a limitless confusion of beings which he knew were as much himself as the local manifestation now beyond the Ultimate Gate.

There were Carters in settings belonging to every known and suspected age of Earth's history, and to remoter ages of earthly entity transcending knowledge, suspicion, and credibility; Carters of forms both human and non-human, vertebrate and invertebrate, conscious and mindless, animal and vegetable. And more, there were Carters having nothing in common with earthly life, but moving outrageously amidst backgrounds of other planets and systems and galaxies and cos-

mic continua; spores of eternal life drifting from world to world, universe to universe, yet all equally himself. Some of the glimpses recalled dreams—both faint and vivid, single and persistent—which he had had through the long years since he first began to dream; and a few possessed a haunting, fascinating and almost horrible familiarity which no earthly logic could explain.

Faced with this realization, Randolph Carter reeled in the clutch of supreme horror—horror such as had not been hinted even at the climax of that hideous night when two had ventured into an ancient and abhorred necropolis under a waning moon and only one had emerged. No death, no doom, no anguish can arouse the surpassing despair which flows from a loss of *identity*. Merging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings—that one no longer has a *self*—that is the nameless summit of agony and dread.

He knew that there had been a Randolph Carter of Boston, yet could not be sure whether he—the fragment or facet of an entity beyond the Ultimate Gate—had been that one or some other. His *self* had been annihilated; and yet he—if indeed there could, in view of that utter nullity of individual existence, be such a thing as *he*—was equally aware of being in some inconceivable way a legion of selves. It was as though his body had been suddenly transformed into one of those many-limbed and many-headed effigies sculptured in Indian temples, and he contemplated the aggregation in a bewildered attempt to discern which was the original and which the additions—if indeed (supremely monstrous thought!) there *were* any original as distinguished from other embodiments.

Then, in the midst of these devastating reflections, Carter's beyond-the-gate fragment was hurled from what had seemed the nadir of horror to black, clutching pits of a horror still more profound. This time it was largely external—a force or personality which at once confronted and surrounded and pervaded him, and which in addition to its local presence, seemed also to be a part of himself, and likewise to be co-existent with all time and conterminous with all space. There was no visual image, yet the sense of entity and the awful concept of combined localism and identity and infinity lent a paralyzing terror beyond anything which any Carter-fragment had hitherto deemed capable of existing.

In the face of that awful wonder, the quasi-Carter forgot the horror of destroyed individuality. It was an All-in-One and One-in-All of limitless being and self—not merely a thing of one space-time continuum, but allied to the ultimate animating essence of existence's whole unbounded sweep—the last, utter sweep which has no confines and which outreaches fancy and mathematics alike. It was perhaps that which certain secret cults of Earth had whispered of as *Yog-Sothoth*, and which has been a deity under other names; that which the crustaceans of Yuggoth worship as the Beyond-One, and which the vaporous brains of the spiral nebulæ know by an untranslatable sign—yet in a flash the Carter-facet realized how slight and fractional all these conceptions are.

And now the Being was addressing the Carter-facet in prodigious waves that smote and burned and thundered—a concentration of energy that blasted its recipient with well-nigh unendurable violence, and that paralleled in an unearthly rhythm the curious swaying of the Ancient Ones, and the flickering of the

monstrous lights, in that baffling region beyond the First Gate. It was as though suns and worlds and universes had converged upon one point whose very position in space they had conspired to annihilate with an impact of resistless fury. But amidst the greater terror one lesser terror was diminished; for the searing waves appeared somehow to isolate the Beyond-the-Gate Carter from his infinity of duplicates—to restore, as it were, a certain amount of the illusion of identity. After a time the hearer began to translate the waves into speech-forms known to him, and his sense of horror and oppression waned. Fright became pure awe, and what had seemed blasphemously abnormal seemed now only ineffably majestic.

"Randolph Carter," it seemed to say, "my manifestations on your planet's extension, the Ancient Ones, have sent you as one who would lately have returned to small lands of dream which he had lost, yet who with greater freedom has risen to greater and nobler desires and curiosities. You wished to sail up golden Oukranos, to search out forgotten ivory cities in orchid-heavy Kled, and to reign on the opal throne of Ilek-Vad, whose fabulous towers and numberless domes rise mighty toward a single red star in a filament alien to your Earth and to all matter. Now, with the passing of two Gates, you wish loftier things. You would not flee like a child from a scene disliked to a dream beloved, but would plunge like a man into that last and inmost of secrets which lies behind all scenes and dreams.

"What you wish, I have found good; and I am ready to grant that which I have granted eleven times only to beings of your planet—five times only to those you call men, or those resembling them. I am ready to show you the Ultimate Mystery, to look on which is to blast a feeble spirit. Yet before you gaze full at that last and first of secrets you may still wield a free choice, and return if you will through the two Gates with the Veil still unrent before your eyes."

CHAPTER 5

A SUDDEN shutting-off of the waves left Carter in a chilling and awesome silence full of the spirit of desolation. On every hand pressed the illimitable vastness of the void; yet the seeker knew that the Being was still there. After a moment he thought of words whose mental substance he flung into the abyss: "I accept. I will not retreat."

The waves surged forth again, and Carter knew that the Being had heard. And now there poured from that limitless Mind a flood of knowledge and explanation which opened new vistas to the seeker, and prepared him for such a grasp of the cosmos as he had never hoped to possess. He was told how childish and limited is the notion of a tri-dimensional world, and what an infinity of directions there are besides the known directions of up-down, forward-backward, right-left. He was shown the smallness and tinsel emptiness of the little Earth gods, with their petty, human interests and connections—their hatreds, rages, loves and vanities; their craving for praise and sacrifice, and their demands for faiths contrary to reason and nature.

While most of the impressions translated themselves to Carter as words, there were others to which other senses gave interpretation. Perhaps with eyes and perhaps with imagination he perceived that he was in a region of dimensions beyond those conceivable to the eye and brain of man. He saw now, in the brooding shadows of that which had been first a vortex of power and then an illimitable void, a

sweep of creation that dizzied his senses. From some inconceivable vantage-point he looked upon prodigious forms whose multiple extensions transcended any conception of being, size and boundaries which his mind had hitherto been able to hold, despite a lifetime of cryptical study. He began to understand dimly why there could exist at the same time the little boy Randolph Carter in the Arkham farmhouse in 1883, the misty form on the vaguely hexagonal pillar beyond the First Gate, the fragment now facing the Presence in the limitless abyss, and all the other Carters his fancy or perception envisaged.

Then the waves increased in strength and sought to improve his understanding, reconciling him to the multiform entity of which his present fragment was an infinitesimal part. They told him that every figure of space is but the result of the intersection by a plane of some corresponding figure of one more dimension —as a square is cut from a cube, or a circle from a sphere. The cube and sphere, of three dimensions, are thus cut from corresponding forms of four dimensions, which men know only through guesses and dreams; and these in turn are cut from forms of five dimensions, and so on up to the dizzy and reachless heights of archetypal infinity. The world of men and of the gods of men is merely an infinitesimal phase of an infinitesimal thing — the three-dimensional phase of that small wholeness reached by the First Gate, where 'Umr at-Tawil dictates dreams to the Ancient Ones. Though men hail it as reality, and brand thoughts of its many-dimensioned original as unreality, it is in truth the very opposite. That which we call substance and reality is shadow and illusion, and that which we call shadow and illusion is substance and reality.

Time, the waves went on, is motionless, and without beginning or end. That it has motion and is the cause of change is an illusion. Indeed, it is itself really an illusion, for except to the narrow sight of beings in limited dimensions there are no such things as past, present and future. Men think of time only because of what they call change, yet that too is illusion. All that was, and is, and is to be, exists simultaneously.

These revelations came with a god-like solemnity which left Carter unable to doubt. Even though they lay almost beyond his comprehension, he felt that they must be true in the light of that final cosmic reality which belies all local perspectives and narrow partial views; and he was familiar enough with profound speculations to be free from the bondage of local and partial conceptions. Had his whole quest not been based upon a faith in the unreality of the local and partial?

After an impressive pause the waves continued, saying that what the denizens of few-dimensioned zones call change is merely a function of their consciousness, which views the external world from various cosmic angles. As the Shapes produced by the cutting of a cone seem to vary with the angles of cutting—being circle, ellipse, parabola or hyperbola according to that angle, yet without any change in the cone itself—so do the local aspects of an unchanged and endless reality seem to change with the cosmic angle of regarding. To this variety of angles of consciousness the feeble beings of the inner worlds are slaves, since with rare exceptions they can not learn to control them. Only a few students of forbidden things have gained inklings of this control, and have thereby conquered time and change. But the entities outside the Gates command all angles, and view the myriad parts of the cosmos in terms of

fragmentary change-involving perspective, or of the changeless totality beyond perspective, in accordance with their will.

As the waves paused again, Carter began to comprehend, vaguely and terrifiedly, the ultimate background of that riddle of lost individuality which had at first so horrified him. His intuition pieced together the fragments of revelation, and brought him closer and closer to a grasp of the secret. He understood that much of the frightful revelation would have come upon him—splitting up his ego amongst myriads of earthly counterparts—inside the First Gate, had not the magic of 'Umr at-Tawil kept it from him in order that he might use the silver key with precision for the Ultimate Gate's opening. Anxious for clearer knowledge, he sent out waves of thought, asking more of the exact relationship between his various facets—the fragment now beyond the Ultimate Gate, the fragment still on the quasi-hexagonal pedestal beyond the First Gate, the boy of 1883, the man of 1928, the various ancestral beings who had formed his heritage and the bulwark of his ego, and the nameless denizens of the other eons and other worlds which that first hideous flash of ultimate perception had identified with him. Slowly the waves of the Being surged out in reply, trying to make plain what was almost beyond the reach of an earthly mind.

All descended lines of beings of the finite dimensions, continued the waves, and all stages of growth in each one of these beings, are merely manifestations of one archetypal and eternal being in the space outside dimensions. Each local being—son, father, grandfather, and so on—and each stage of individual being—infant, child, boy, man—is merely one of the infinite phases of that same archetypal and eternal being, caused by a variation in the angle of the consciousness-plane which cuts it. Randolph Carter at all ages; Randolph Carter and all his ancestors, both human and pre-human, terrestrial and pre-terrestrial; all these were only phases of one ultimate, eternal "Carter" outside space and time—phantom projections differentiated only by the angle at which the plane of consciousness happened to cut the eternal archetype in each case.

A slight change of angle could turn the student of today into the child of yesterday; could turn Randolph Carter into that wizard, Edmund Carter who fled from Salem to the hills behind Arkham in 1692, or that Pickman Carter who in the year 2169 would use strange means in repelling the Mongol hordes from Australia; could turn a human Carter into one of those earlier entities which had dwelt in primal Hyperborea and worshipped black, plastic Tsathoggua after flying down from Kythamil, the double planet that once revolved around Arcturus; could turn a terrestrial Carter to a remotely ancestral and doubtfully shaped dweller on Kythamil itself, or a still remoter creature of trans-galactic Stronti, or a four-dimensioned gaseous consciousness in an older space-time continuum, or a vegetable brain of the future on a dark, radio-active comet of inconceivable orbit —and so on, in endless cosmic cycle.

The archetypes, throbbed the waves, are the people of the Ultimate Abyss—formless, ineffable, and guessed at only by rare dreamers on the low-dimensioned worlds. Chief among such was this informing Being itself . . . *which indeed was Carter's own archetype.* The glutless zeal of Carter and all his forebears for forbidden cosmic secrets was a natural result of derivation from the Supreme Archetype. On every world all great wizards, all great thinkers, all great artists, are facets of It.

ALMOST stunned with awe, and with a kind of terrifying delight, Randolph Carter's consciousness did homage to that transcendent Entity from which it was derived. As the waves paused again he pondered in the mighty silence, thinking of strange tributes, stranger questions, and still stranger requests. Curious concepts flowed conflictingly through a brain dazed with unaccustomed vistas and unforeseen disclosures. It occurred to him that, if these disclosures were literally true, he might bodily visit all those infinitely distant ages and parts of the universe which he had hitherto known only in dreams, could he but command the magic to change the angle of his consciousness-plane. And did not the silver key supply that magic? Had it not first changed him from a man in 1928 to a boy in 1883, and then to something quite outside time? Oddly, despite his present apparent absence of body, he knew that the key was still with him.

While the silence still lasted, Randolph Carter radiated forth the thoughts and questions which assailed him. He knew that in this ultimate abyss he was equidistant from every facet of his archetype—human or non-human, terrestrial or extra-terrestrial, galactic or trans-galactic; and his curiosity regarding the other phases of his being—especially those phases which were farthest from an earthly 1928 in time and space, or which had most persistently haunted his dreams throughout life—was at fever heat. He felt that his archetypal Entity could at will send him bodily to any of these phases of bygone and distant life by changing his consciousness-plane, and despite the marvels he had undergone he burned for the further marvel of walking in the flesh through those grotesque and incredible scenes which visions of the night had fragmentarily brought him.

Without definite intention he was asking the Presence for access to a dim, fantastic world whose five multicolored suns, alien constellations, dizzily black crags, clawed, tapir-snouted denizens, bizarre metal towers, unexplained tunnels, and cryptical floating cylinders had intruded again and again upon his slumbers. That world, he felt vaguely, was in all the conceivable cosmos the one most freely in touch with others; and he longed to explore the vistas whose beginnings he had glimpsed, and to embark through space to those still remoter worlds with which the clawed, snouted denizens trafficked. There was no time for fear. As at all crises of his strange life, sheer cosmic curiosity triumphed over everything else.

When the waves resumed their awesome pulsing, Carter knew that his terrible request was granted. The Being was telling him of the nighted gulfs through which he would have to pass, of the unknown quintuple star in an unsuspected galaxy around which the alien world revolved, and of the burrowing inner horrors against which the clawed, snouted race of that world perpetually fought. It told him, too, of how the angle of his personal consciousness-plane, and the angle of his consciousness-plane regarding the space-time elements of the sought-for world, would have to be tilted simultaneously in order to restore to that world the Carter-facet which had dwelt there.

The Presence warned him to be sure of his symbols if he wished ever to return from the remote and alien world he had chosen, and he radiated back an impatient affirmation; confident that the silver key, which he felt was with him and which he knew had tilted both world and personal planes in throwing him back to 1883, contained those symbols which were meant. And now the Being,

grasping his impatience, signified its readiness to accomplish the monstrous precipitation. The waves abruptly ceased, and there supervened a momentary stillness tense with nameless and dreadful expectancy.

Then, without warning, came a whirring and drumming that swelled to a terrific thundering. Once again Carter felt himself the focal point of an intense concentration of energy which smote and hammered and seared unbearably in the now-familiar rhythm of outer space, and which he could not classify as either the blasting heat of a blazing star, or the all-petrifying cold of the ultimate abyss. Bands and rays of color utterly foreign to any spectrum of our universe played and wove and interlaced before him, and he was conscious of a frightful velocity of motion. He caught one fleeting glimpse of a figure sitting *alone* upon a cloudy throne more hexagonal than otherwise. . . .

CHAPTER 6

As THE Hindoo paused in his story he saw that de Marigny and Phillips were watching him absorbedly. Aspinwall pretended to ignore the narrative and kept his eyes ostentatiously on the papers before him. The alien-rhythmed ticking of the coffin-shaped clock took on a new and portentous meaning, while the fumes from the choked, neglected tripods wove themselves into fantastic and inexplicable shapes, and formed disturbing combinations with the grotesque figures of the draft-swayed tapestries. The old negro who had tended them was gone—perhaps some growing tension had frightened him out of the house. An almost apologetic hesitancy hampered the speaker as he resumed in his oddly labored yet idiomatic voice.

"You have found these things of the abyss hard to believe," he said, "but you will find the tangible and material things ahead still harder. That is the way of our minds. Marvels are doubly incredible when brought into three dimensions from the vague regions of possible dream. I shall not try to tell you much—that would be another and very different story. I will tell only what you absolutely have to know."

Carter, after that final vortex of alien and polychromatic rhythm, had found himself in what for a moment he thought was his old insistent dream. He was, as many a night before, walking amidst throngs of clawed, snouted beings through the streets of a labyrinth of inexplicably fashioned metal under a blaze of diverse solar color; and as he looked down he saw that his body was like those of the others — rugose, partly squamous, and curiously articulated in a fashion mainly insect-like yet not without a caricaturish resemblance to the human outline. The silver key was still in his grasp, though held by a noxious-looking claw.

In another moment the dream-sense vanished, and he felt rather as one just awakened from a dream. The ultimate abyss—the Being—the entity of absurd, outlandish race called Randolph Carter on a world of the future not yet born—some of these things were parts of the persistent recurrent dreams of the wizard Zkauba on the planet Yaddith. They were too persistent—they interfered with his duties in weaving spells to keep the frightful Dholes in their burrows, and became mixed up with his recollections of the myriad real worlds he had visited in light-beam envelopes. And now they had become quasi-real as never before. This heavy, material silver key in his right upper claw, exact image of one he had dreamt about, meant no good. He must rest and reflect, and consult the tablets of

Nhing for advice on what to do. Climbing a metal wall in a lane off the main concourse, he entered his apartment and approached the rack of tablets.

Seven day-fractions later Zkauba squatted on his prism in awe and half despair, for the truth had opened up a new and conflicting set of memories. Nevermore could he know the peace of being one entity. For all time and space he was two: Zkauba the wizard of Yaddith, disgusted with the thought of the repellent earth-mammal Carter that he was to be and had been, and Randolph Carter, of Boston on the Earth, shivering with fright at the clawed, snouted thing which he had once been, and had become again.

The time units spent on Yaddith, croaked the Swami—whose labored voice was beginning to show signs of fatigue—made a tale in themselves which could not be related in brief compass. There were trips to Stronti and Mthura and Kath, and other worlds in the twenty-eight galaxies accessible to the light-beam envelopes of the creatures of Yaddith, and trips back and forth through eons of time with the aid of the silver key and various other symbols known to Yaddith's wizards. There were hideous struggles with the bleached viscous Dholes in the primal tunnels that honeycombed the planet. There were awed sessions in libraries amongst the massed lore of ten thousand worlds living and dead. There were tense conferences with other minds of Yaddith, including that of the Arch-Ancient Buo. Zkauba told no one of what had befallen his personality, but when the Randolph Carter facet was uppermost he would study furiously every possible means of returning to the Earth and to human form, and would desperately practise human speech with the alien throat-organs so ill adapted to it.

The Carter-facet had soon learned with horror that the silver key was unable to effect his return to human form. It was, as he deduced too late from things he remembered, things he dreamed, and things he inferred from the lore of Yaddith, a product of Hyperborea on Earth; with power over the personal consciousness-angles of human beings alone. It could, however, change the planetary angle and send the user at will through time in an unchanged body. There had been an added spell which gave it limitless powers it otherwise lacked; but this, too, was a human discovery—peculiar to a spatially unreachable region, and not to be duplicated by the wizards of Yaddith. It had been written on the undecipherable parchment in the hideously carven box with the silver key, and Carter bitterly lamented that he had left it behind. The now inaccessible Being of the abyss had warned him to be sure of his symbols, and had doubtless thought he lacked nothing.

As time wore on he strove harder and harder to utilize the monstrous lore of Yaddith in finding a way back to the abyss and the omnipotent Entity. With his new knowledge he could have done much toward reading the cryptic parchment; but that power, under present conditions, was merely ironic. There were times, however, when the Zkauba-facet was uppermost, and when he strove to erase the conflicting Carter-memories which troubled him.

THUS long spaces of time wore on—ages longer than the brain of man could grasp, since the beings of Yaddith die only after prolonged cycles. After many hundreds of revolutions the Carter-facet seemed to gain on the Zkauba-facet, and would spend vast periods calculating the distance of Yaddith in space and time

from the human Earth that was to be. The figures were staggering—eons of light-years beyond counting—but the immemorial lore of Yaddith fitted Carter to grasp such things. He cultivated the power of dreaming himself momentarily Earthward, and learned many things about our planet that he had never known before. But he could not dream the needed formula on the missing parchment.

Then at last he conceived a wild plan of escape from Yaddith—which began when he found a drug that would keep his Zkauba-facet always dormant, yet without dissolution of the knowledge and memories of Zkauba. He thought that his calculations would let him perform a voyage with a light-wave envelope such as no being of Yaddith had ever performed — a *bodily* voyage through nameless eons and across incredible galactic reaches to the solar system and the Earth itself. Once on Earth, though in the body of a clawed, snouted thing, he might be able somehow to find—and finish deciphering — the strangely hieroglyphed parchment he had left in the car at Arkham; and with its aid—and the key's—resume his normal terrestrial semblance.

He was not blind to the perils of the attempt. He knew that when he had brought the planet-angle to the right eon (a thing impossible to do while hurtling through space), Yaddith would be a dead world dominated by triumphant Dholes, and that his escape in the light-wave envelope would be a matter of grave doubt. Likewise was he aware of how he must achieve suspended animation, in the manner of an adept, to endure the eon-long flight through fathomless abysses. He knew, too, that—assuming his voyage succeeded—he must immunize himself to the bacterial and other earthly conditions hostile to a body from Yaddith. Furthermore, he must provide a way of feigning human shape on Earth until he might recover and decipher the parchment and resume that shape in truth. Otherwise he would probably be discovered and destroyed by the people in horror as a thing that should not be. And there must be some gold—luckily obtainable on Yaddith—to tide him over that period of quest.

Slowly Carter's plans went forward. He provided a light-wave envelope of abnormal toughness, able to stand both the prodigious time-transition and the unexampled flight through space. He tested all his calculations, and sent forth his Earthward dreams again and again, bringing them as close as possible to 1928. He practised suspended animation with marvelous success. He discovered just the bacterial agent he needed, and worked out the varying gravity-stress to which he must become used. He artfully fashioned a waxen mask and loose costume enabling him to pass among men as a human being of a sort, and devised a doubly potent spell with which to hold back the Dholes at the moment of his starting from the dead, black Yaddith of the inconceivable future. He took care, too, to assemble a large supply of the drugs—unobtainable on Earth—which would keep his Zbauka-facet in abeyance till he might shed the Yaddith body, nor did he neglect a small store of gold for earthly use.

The starting-day was a time of doubt and apprehension. Carter climbed up to his envelope-platform, on the pretext of sailing for the triple star Nython, and crawled into the sheath of shining metal. He had just room to perform the ritual of the silver key, and as he did so he slowly started the levitation of his envelope. There was an appalling seething and darkening of the day, and a hideous racking of pain. The cosmos seemed to

reel irresponsibly, and the other constellations danced in a black sky.

All at once Carter felt a new equilibrium. The cold of interstellar gulfs gnawed at the outside of his envelope, and he could see that he floated free in space—the metal building from which he had started having decayed years before. Below him the ground was festering with gigantic Dholes; and even as he looked, one reared up several hundred feet and levelled a bleached, viscous end at him. But his spells were effective, and in another moment he was falling away from Yaddith, unharmed.

CHAPTER 7

IN THAT bizarre room in New Orleans, from which the old black servant had instinctively fled, the odd voice of Swami Chandraputra grew hoarser still.

"Gentlemen," he continued, "I will not ask you to believe these things until I have shown you special proof. Accept it, then, as a myth, when I tell you of the *thousands of light-years—thousands of years of time, and uncounted billions of miles* that Randolph Carter hurtled through space as a nameless, alien entity in a thin envelope of electron-activated metal. He timed his period of suspended animation with utmost care, planning to have it end only a few years before the time of landing on the Earth in or near 1928.

"He will never forget that awakening. Remember, gentlemen, that before that eon-long sleep *he had lived consciously for thousands of terrestrial years amidst the alien and horrible wonders of Yaddith.* There was a hideous gnawing of cold, a cessation of menacing dreams, and a glance through the eye-plates of the envelope. Stars, clusters, nebulæ, on every hand—*and at last their outlines bore some kinship to the constellations of Earth that he knew.*

"Some day his descent into the solar system may be told. He saw Kynarth and Yuggoth on the rim, passed close to Neptune and glimpsed the hellish white fungi that spot it, learned an untellable secret from the close-glimpsed mists of Jupiter, and saw the horror on one of the satellites, and gazed at the cyclopean ruins that sprawl over Mars' ruddy disk. When the Earth drew near he saw it as a thin crescent which swelled alarmingly in size. He slackened speed, though his sensations of homecoming made him wish to lose not a moment. I will not try to tell you of those sensations as I learned them from Carter.

"Well, toward the last Carter hovered about in the Earth's upper air waiting till daylight came over the Western Hemisphere. He wanted to land where he had left—near the Snake Den in the hills behind Arkham. If any of you have been away from home long—and I know one of you has—I leave it to you how the sight of New England's rolling hills and great elms and gnarled orchards and ancient stone walls must have affected him.

"He came down at dawn in the lower meadow of the old Carter place, and was thankful for the silence and solitude. It was autumn, as when he had left, and the smell of the hills was balm to his soul. He managed to drag the metal envelope up the slope of the timber lot into the Snake Den, though it would not go through the weed-choked fissure to the inner cave. It was there also that he covered his alien body with the human clothing and waxen mask which would be necessary. He kept the envelope here for over a year, till certain circumstances made a new hiding-place necessary.

"He walked to Arkham—incidentally

practising the management of his body in human posture and against terrestrial gravity—and got his gold changed to money at a bank. He also made some inquiries—posing as a foreigner ignorant of much English—and found that the year was 1930, only two years after the goal he had aimed at.

"Of course, his position was horrible. Unable to assert his identity, forced to live on guard every moment, with certain difficulties regarding food, and with a need to conserve the alien drug which kept his Zkauba-facet dormant, he felt that he must act as quickly as possible. Going to Boston and taking a room in the decaying West End, where he could live cheaply and inconspicuously, he at once established inquiries concerning Randolph Carter's estate and effects. It was then that he learned how anxious Mr. Aspinwall, here, was to have the estate divided, and how valiantly Mr. de Marigny and Mr. Phillips strove to keep it intact."

The Hindoo bowed, though no expression crossed his dark, tranquil, and thickly bearded face.

"Indirectly," he continued, "Carter secured a good copy of the missing parchment and began working on its deciphering. I am glad to say that I was able to help in all this—for he appealed to me quite early, and through me came in touch with other mystics throughout the world. I went to live with him in Boston—a wretched place in Chambers Street. As for the parchment—I am pleased to help Mr. de Marigny in his perplexity. To him let me say that the language of those hieroglyphics is not Naacal, but R'lyehian, which was brought to Earth by the spawn of Cthulhu countless ages ago. It is, of course, a translation—there was an Hyperborean original millions of years earlier in the primal tongue of Tsath-yo.

"There was more to decipher than Carter had looked for, but at no time did he give up hope. Early this year he made great strides through a book he imported from Nepal, and there is no question but that he will win before long. Unfortunately, however, one handicap has developed — the exhaustion of the alien drug which keeps the Zkauba-facet dormant. This is not, however, as great a calamity as was feared. Carter's personality is gaining in the body, and when Zkauba comes uppermost—for shorter and shorter periods, and now only when evoked by some unusual excitement—he is generally too dazed to undo any of Carter's work. He can not find the metal envelope that would take him back to Yaddith, for although he almost did, once, Carter hid it anew at a time when the Zkauba-facet was wholly latent. All the harm he has done is to frighten a few people and create certain nightmare rumors among the Poles and Lithuanians of Boston's West End. So far, he has never injured the careful disguise prepared by the Carter-facet, though he sometimes throws it off so that parts have to be replaced. I have seen what lies beneath—and it is not good to see.

"A month ago Carter saw the advertisement of this meeting, and knew that he must act quickly to save his estate. He could not wait to decipher the parchment and resume his human form. Consequently he deputed me to act for him.

"Gentlemen, I say to you that Randolph Carter is not dead; that he is temporarily in an anomalous condition, but that within two or three months at the outside he will be able to appear in proper form and demand the custody of his estate. I am prepared to offer proof if necessary. Therefore I beg that you will adjourn this meeting for an indefinite period."

CHAPTER 8

DE MARIGNY and Phillips stared at the Hindoo as if hypnotized, while Aspinwall emitted a series of snorts and bellows. The old attorney's disgust had by now surged into open rage, and he pounded the table with an apoplectically veined fist. When he spoke, it was in a kind of bark.

"How long is this foolery to be borne? I've listened an hour to this madman—this faker—and now he has the damned effrontery to say Randolph Carter is alive—to ask us to postpone the settlement for no good reason! Why don't you throw the scoundrel out, de Marigny? Do you mean to make us all the butts of a charlatan or idiot?"

De Marigny quietly raised his hand and spoke softly.

"Let us think slowly and clearly. This has been a very singular tale, and there are things in it which I, as a mystic not altogether ignorant, recognize as far from impossible. Furthermore—since 1930 I have received letters from the Swami which tally with his account."

As he paused, old Mr. Phillips ventured a word.

"Swami Chandraputra spoke of proofs. I, too, recognize much that is significant in this story, and I have myself had many oddly corroborative letters from the Swami during the last two years; but some of these statements are very extreme. Is there not something tangible which can be shown?"

At last the impassive-faced Swami replied, slowly and hoarsely, and drawing an object from the pocket of his loose coat as he spoke.

"While none of you here has ever *seen* the silver key itself, Messrs. de Marigny and Phillips have seen photographs of it. *Does this look familiar to you?*"

He fumblingly laid on the table, with his large, white-mittened hand, a heavy key of tarnished silver—nearly five inches long, of unknown and utterly exotic workmanship, and covered from end to end with hieroglyphs of the most bizarre description. De Marigny and Phillips gasped.

"That's it!" cried de Marigny. "The camera doesn't lie. I couldn't be mistaken!"

But Aspinwall had already launched a reply.

"Fools! What does it prove? If that's really the key that belonged to my cousin, it's up to this foreigner—this damned nigger—to explain how he got it! Randolph Carter vanished with the key four years ago. How do we know he wasn't robbed and murdered? He was half crazy himself, and in touch with still crazier people.

"Look here, you nigger—where did you get that key? Did you kill Randolph Carter?"

The Swami's features, abnormally placid, did not change; but the remote, irisless black eyes behind them blazed dangerously. He spoke with great difficulty.

"Please control yourself, Mr. Aspinwall. There is another form of proof that I *could* give, but its effect upon everybody would not be pleasant. Let us be reasonable. Here are some papers obviously written since 1930, and in the unmistakable style of Randolph Carter."

He clumsily drew a long envelope from inside his loose coat and handed it to the sputtering attorney as de Marigny and Phillips watched with chaotic thoughts and a dawning feeling of supernal wonder.

"Of course the handwriting is almost illegible—but remember that Randolph Carter now has no hands well adapted to forming human script."

Aspinwall looked through the papers

hurriedly, and was visibly perplexed, but he did not change his demeanor. The room was tense with excitement and nameless dread, and the alien rhythm of the coffin-shaped clock had an utterly diabolic sound to de Marigny and Phillips, though the lawyer seemed affected not at all.

Aspinwall spoke again. "These look like clever forgeries. If they aren't, they may mean that Randolph Carter has been brought under the control of people with no good purpose. There's only one thing to do—have this faker arrested. De Marigny, will you telephone for the police?"

"Let us wait," answered their host. "I do not think this case calls for the police. I have a certain idea. Mr. Aspinwall, this gentleman is a mystic of real attainments. He says he is in the confidence of Randolph Carter. Will it satisfy you if he can answer certain questions which could be answered only by one in such confidence? I know Carter, and can ask such questions. Let me get a book which I think will make a good test."

He turned toward the door to the library, Phillips dazedly following in a kind of automatic way. Aspinwall remained where he was, studying closely the Hindoo who confronted him with abnormally impassive face. Suddenly, as Chandraputra clumsily restored the silver key to his pocket, the lawyer emitted a guttural shout.

"Hey, by Heaven! I've got it! This rascal is in disguise. I don't believe he's an East Indian at all. That face—it isn't a face, but a *mask!* I guess his story put that into my head, but it's true. It never moves, and that turban and beard hide the edges. This fellow's a common crook! He isn't even a foreigner—I've been watching his language. He's a Yankee of some sort. And look at those mittens—he knows his fingerprints could be spotted. Damn you, I'll pull that thing off——"

"Stop!" The hoarse, oddly alien voice of the Swami held a tone beyond all mere earthly fright. "I told you there was *another form of proof which I could give if necessary,* and I warned you not to provoke me to it. This red-faced old meddler is right—I'm not really an East Indian. *This face is a mask, and what it covers is not human.* You others have guessed—I felt that minutes ago. It wouldn't be pleasant if I took that mask off—let it alone, Ernest. I may as well tell you that *I am Randolph Carter.*"

No one moved. Aspinwall snorted and made vague motions. De Marigny and Phillips, across the room, watched the workings of the red face and studied the back of the turbaned figure that confronted him. The clock's abnormal ticking was hideous, and the tripod fumes and swaying arras danced a dance of death. The half-choking lawyer broke the silence.

"No you don't, you crook—you can't scare me! You've reasons of your own for not wanting that mask off. Maybe we'd know who you are. Off with it——"

As he reached forward, the Swami seized his hand with one of his own clumsily mittened members, evoking a curious cry of mixed pain and surprize. De Marigny started toward the two, but paused confused as the pseudo-Hindoo's shout of protest changed to a wholly inexplicable rattling and buzzing sound. Aspinwall's red face was furious, and with his free hand he made another lunge at his opponent's bushy beard. This time he succeeded in getting a hold, and at his frantic tug the whole waxen visage came loose from the turban and clung to the lawyer's apoplectic fist.

As it did so, Aspinwall uttered a frightful gurgling cry, and Phillips and de Marigny saw his face convulsed with a wilder, deeper and more hideous epilepsy of stark panic than ever they had seen on human countenance before. The pseudo-Swami had meanwhile released his other hand and was standing as if dazed, making buzzing noises of a most abnormal quality. Then the turbaned figure slumped oddly into a posture scarcely human, and began a curious, fascinated sort of shuffle toward the coffin-shaped clock that ticked out its cosmic and abnormal rhythm. His now uncovered face was turned away, and de Marigny and Phillips could not see what the lawyer's act had disclosed. Then their attention was turned to Aspinwall, who was sinking ponderously to the floor. The spell was broken—but when they reached the old man he was dead.

Turning quickly to the shuffling Swami's receding back, de Marigny saw one of the great white mittens drop listlessly off a dangling arm. The fumes of the olibanum were thick, and all that could be glimpsed of the revealed hand was something long and black. Before the Creole could reach the retreating figure, old Mr. Phillips laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Don't!" he whispered. "We don't know what we're up against. That other facet, you know—Zkauba, the wizard of Yaddith. . . ."

The turbaned figure had now reached the abnormal clock, and the watchers saw through the dense fumes a blurred black claw fumbling with the tall, hieroglyphed door. The fumbling made a queer, clicking sound. Then the figure entered the coffin-shaped case and pulled the door shut after it.

De Marigny could no longer be restrained, but when he reached and opened the clock it was empty. The abnormal ticking went on, beating out the dark, cosmic rhythm which underlies all mystical gate-openings. On the floor the great white mitten, and the dead man with a bearded mask clutched in his hand, had nothing further to reveal.

* * * * *

A YEAR passed, and nothing has been heard of Randolph Carter. His estate is still unsettled. The Boston address from which one "Swami Chandraputra" sent inquiries to various mystics in 1930-31-32 was indeed tenanted by a strange Hindoo, but he left shortly before the date of the New Orleans conference and has never been seen since. He was said to be dark, expressionless, and bearded, and his landlord thinks the swarthy mask—which was duly exhibited—looks very much like him. He was never, however, suspected of any connection with the nightmare apparitions whispered of by local Slavs. The hills behind Arkham were searched for the "metal envelope," but nothing of the sort was ever found. However, a clerk in Arkham's First National Bank does recall a queer turbaned man who cashed an odd bit of gold bullion in October, 1930.

De Marigny and Phillips scarcely know what to make of the business. After all, what was proved? There was a story. There was a key which might have been forged from one of the pictures Carter had freely distributed in 1928. There were papers—all indecisive. There was a masked stranger, but who now living saw behind the mask? Amidst the strain and the olibanum fumes that act of vanishing in the clock might easily have been a dual hallucination. Hindoos know much of hypnotism. Reason proclaims the "Swami" a criminal with designs on Randolph Carter's estate. But the autopsy said that Aspinwall had died of shock. Was it rage

alone which caused it? And some things in that story . . . .

In a vast room hung with strangely figured arras and filled with olibanum fumes, Etienne-Laurent de Marigny often sits listening with vague sensations to the abnormal rhythm of that hieroglyphed, coffin-shaped clock.

Wild Grapes

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A strange little story about the white cloud that hung over the unmarked grave of a murdered man

THE echo of his neighbors' mocking voices lingered in Luke Adam's mind—"Wild grapes!" scornfully said, pityingly whispered from mouth to ear, from farm to farm and on into Sac Prairie. Standing there on his rickety porch, he smiled, his grim lips curving only slightly, his eyes hard and cold. His gaze went from the farmyard across the fields to the clump of cedars fringing his land to the southwest. Dividing the trees from the fields were the wild grapes he had planted.

He had planted them at night. Did those fools think of that? Not they, and the better for him. Darkness was a welcome cloak for his work, since the body could not have been handled in the daytime.

Twilight did not obscure the strong green of the wild grapes. He considered them in the growing darkness, the long line of them curving along the slope, and finally drove his eyes to the thick clump growing where the body of his Uncle Ralsa lay. He complimented himself again on the sagacity he had shown in setting wild grapes to grow on the spot where the body was buried. No expense had been incurred, and the broken earth on the edge of the field had excited no comment but the scornful voices of his farming neighbors, who thought him crazy to go to any trouble about wild grapes when there were so many of them in the bottoms not far from his land.

He was glad, too, that the old man had the reputation for taking long and mysterious journeys and staying away for months at a time without communicating with anyone. All the old man's friends nodded solemnly and said, "Ralsa's gone on another tear." No one had suspected anything. Luke could appreciate the irony of their laughter over his wild grapes.

The stars brightened, and the afterglow faded to a fan of emerald light flung upward against the western sky. Luke lit his pipe and watched the slow smoke trail upward from his lips. A whippoorwill began to call from the bottoms. Abruptly a small dark shape dropped noiselessly to the roof of the corn-crib and shrilled its flute-like call into the growing night.

Luke thought of the legend about

whippoorwills calling for a dying man's soul. He caught up a clod of earth and flung it at the bird on the corn-crib.

"Get out," he muttered harshly. "You got Uncle Ralsa—you don't get me." He laughed at his words, grimly.

One by one the whippoorwills assaulted the silence, and from the sky came the harsh calls of nighthawks and woodcocks. An owl hooted mournfully from the grove of cedars. Presently the moon pushed itself into the sky above the low range of hills to the east, and long shadows haunted the ground.

Thinking of his uncle, Luke experienced a shudder of irritation at himself that he had not killed the old man with one blow. "They'll get you for this, Luke, and if they don't, I will," he had had time to say before that second blow. And he had cursed him, too. Luke smiled, took his pipe from his mouth, and spat at a stone not far from the porch steps.

"C'mon, Ralsa," he murmured. "I'm still waitin'."

He felt warmth creeping over him at the satisfactory knowledge of his ownership of his uncle's farm. He had always wanted it; now it was his, even if the fools thereabouts considered him only a caretaker. When it would be plain to them that the old man was never coming back, even they would have to acknowledge him as owner.

He knocked out his pipe presently and stood up, stretching himself. Then he turned to go into the house. From the threshold he looked once more toward the line of wild grapes, fixing his eyes on the large clump in the center, now lost against the dark background of the cedars.

As he looked, he reflected that he had never before been aware of that patch of sky showing through between the trees above the grapevines.

Even as he thought it, the sky moved gently to one side. For a breathless moment Luke felt a shock of terror; then he took a deep breath, pressed his lips firmly together, and stared long and hard at the patch of sky.

The sky wavered a little, moved casually to the north, and drifted southward again.

It was not sky! It was a whiteness above the secret grave, standing out against the cedars—not sky showing through from beyond!

Luke flung himself into the house, banging the door behind him, and stood with his back against it. Sweat flecked his forehead, and his hands shook despite his determination to control himself. He strove to convince himself that he had seen nothing, that his eyes and the night had combined to play a ghastly trick on him.

Presently he moved away from the door. He halted just before he reached the west window, hesitation looped about his legs, stopping their advance. If he went forward, he would look out of the window. He would look at the grave. And his eyes might trick him again.

He stood there, feeling that the house was pressing its walls toward him. A sense of ominous closeness enveloped him. Presently he groped for the table, found the lamp, and the box of matches. He struck one and held the dancing flame to the wick, his shadow grotesque against the wall and the ceiling. The small, poorly furnished room sprang into dubious life.

A FEELING of security returned to him with the light, and he sat down at the table, resting his head on his clenched fists. The noise of the whippoorwills

dinned into the room, insistence in the wealth of flute-like notes that welled across the fields from the lowlands and the marsh beyond. As he sat listening to them, unreasonable anger grew at their calls, and he determined to go whippoorwill-hunting in the morning, intent upon paying them back for the fright he had got.

The fear having gone completely out of him, he rose abruptly and strode boldly to the window. He looked out. The white mass had grown. It lowered threateningly above the row of wild grapes, uncanny movement breaking its outlines. As he looked, the moonlight faded suddenly, clouds blanketing it away from the earth, and the white shape against the cedars seemed to glow as if from some inner light.

He fell back from the window, his heart pounding with maddening insistence. There *was* something at the grave. Terror possessed him suddenly, terror driven into fierce life at the fear that somehow Ralsa Adam was coming back to get him, as the dead man had promised.

He made a frantic calculation. It was almost a month now since he had killed the old man. No one had suspected. No one had come for him. No solid flesh could rise from that grave. Yet the old man had said he would return, if Luke——

The door swung suddenly wide, forced open by a gust of wind, and the night gaped blackly beyond. Lamplight lit the porch floor tentatively, fingers of flickering light turned back by the darkness.

Luke looked out through the doorway toward the southwest, where the grave was. The white thing was still there, moving with the wind, now this way, now that, and occasionally there were flaffing white arms seeming to beckon him, or grotesque heads lolling horribly against the night.

He dragged himself from the room to the porch, where he leaned against a post, looking with fear-maddened eyes toward the line of wild grapes. There was something about that whiteness—something that brought sudden hope to him. He stared, cold sweat smarting in his eyes.

Then he remembered. Phosphorus from decaying bodies. He had read of that somewhere. It sometimes happened. So-called ghosts in graveyards were nothing but phosphorus — he remembered reading about it. He almost sobbed his relief, and for a moment laughed weakly at himself.

He tempered his relief with the thought that he had better make sure about the phosphorescence. Immediately another thought occurred to him and brought apprehension. If it were phosphorescence, someone might possibly notice it and investigate, though the spot was out of sight of all farmhouses and all roads save the poorly marked trail to his own house, and in sight of strange fields only during the day.

HE STEPPED from the porch, leaving the lamplit doorway open behind him, and strode away into the darkness, frightening up whippoorwills as he went. As he came into the southwest forty, uneasiness took possession of him at recognition of the fact that the phosphorescence did not fade, that it seemed to have descended more closely about the clump of grapevines growing from the spot where the body lay concealed.

He halted uncertainly ten feet from the vines and looked. The whiteness was phosphorescence, he was sure of that. He felt vaguely that it ought by rights to be closer to the ground, but he could not be sure. And it moved oddly, sometimes

with the wind, but sometimes not. There was a very odd shape to it, too. He felt misgivings, and cast a glance backward for the reassuring sight of the rectangle of light from the house.

Despite a sudden feeling that he should go no farther, he stepped forward. He came up to the mass of vines and looked carefully down at the unmarked spot where he had nocturnally buried Ralsa Adam almost a month ago.

The ground seemed oddly broken.

He pushed away the grapevines and peered closer.

Suddenly he felt something close about his ankle, felt something whip toward his uncovered head. He jerked upward—and felt his arms, too, caught. Then he looked up.

His hoarse, terror-fraught screams were muffled by the writhing mass of grapevines which descended upon him, their rustling like an echo of Ralsa Adam's dying voice, their sentient movement vengefully alive.

HE WAS found two mornings after. He had been strangled; there were still vines wound oddly about his throat. It was said in Sac Prairie that he had probably entangled himself somehow and had caused his death. Everybody said it served him right. In his struggles he had kicked up the ground so that the body of Ralsa Adam was discovered.

The farmers who dug the old man out said he was not a pleasant sight. The big grapevine which Luke had planted above his victim had rooted itself firmly in the decaying flesh and clung fiercely to the body when they moved it.

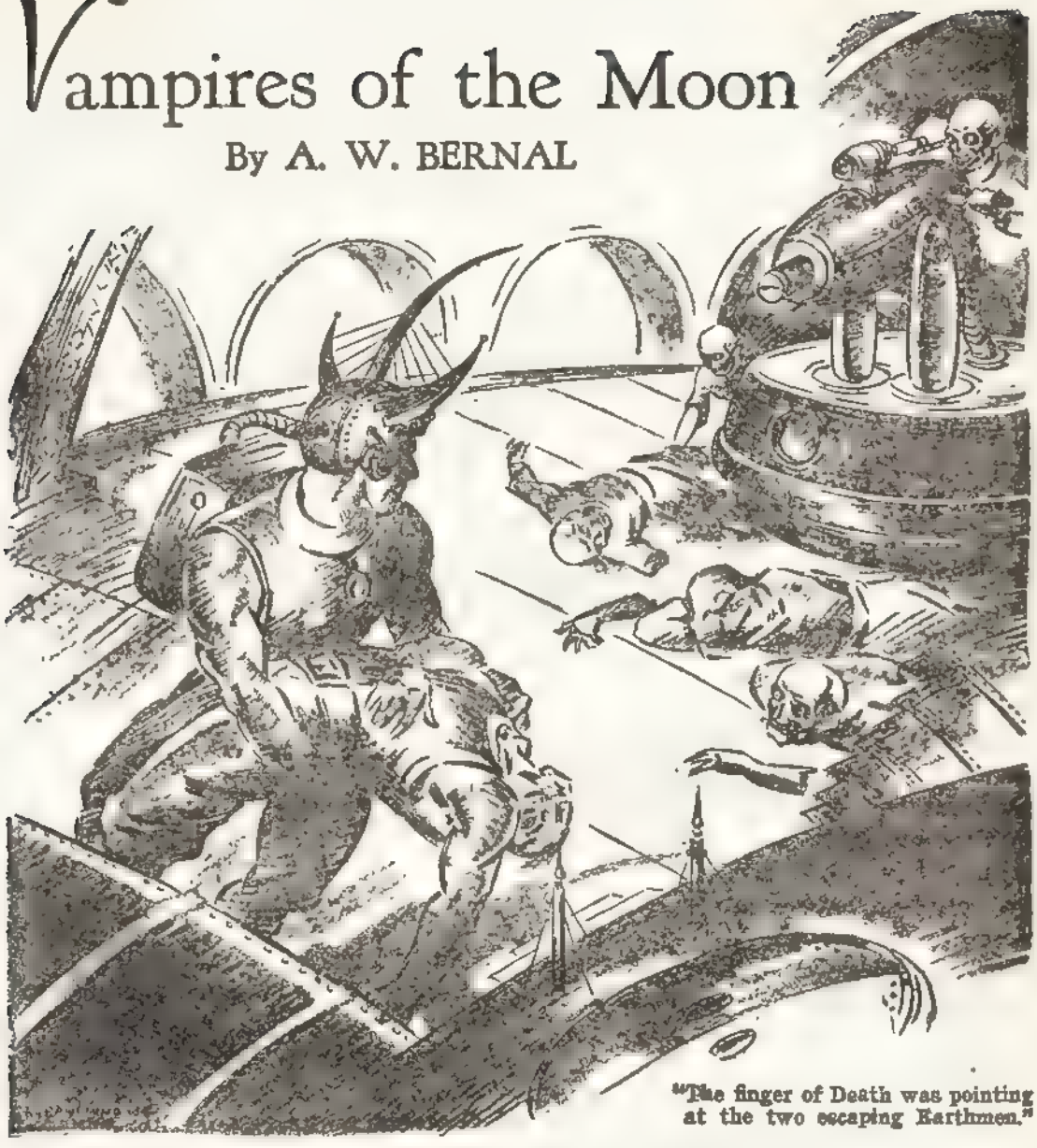
Magic Carpets

By ETHEL MORGAN-DUNHAM

Crinkled petals pink or white, hanging by a thread,
Crinkled petals purple, crinkled petals red,
Form your plume-like fleecy balls, flaunt them in the breeze
All throughout the summer, rivaling the trees;
But when autumn days appear, or the clouds are dark,
Fall down slowly on the ground, mingle with the bark
That was shed before the leaves, now a salmon sheen,
Make weird carpets of the grass, veil the living green.

Vampires of the Moon

By A. W. BERNAL



"The finger of Death was pointing at the two escaping Earthmen."

A sensational story of the Masters of the Moon and their mindless slaves —and a terrible threat against the inhabitants of Earth

The Story Thus Far

TWO space-ships of the Trans-spatial Service Legion—the *Thunderbolt* and the *America VII*—had vanished when Captain Richard Starr sent his younger brother, Lieutenant John Starr, and the latter's closest friends, Lieutenants Hall Bradley and Rusty Steele, to search for the missing vessels.

In the *Meteor IV* the trio of Earthmen left Moon Headquarters and strayed into the interior of the satellite, where they were captured under weird circumstances by the eery inhabitants of a city hidden away in a cavern of phosphorescent light. Fortunately there was a breathable atmosphere in this inner world.

Steele, separated from his companions,

This story began in WEIRD TALES for May.

was able to converse with his captors—living mummies—by means of a thought-transference helmet of his own invention. He was taken to see the Ten—the ruling council of the moon-men.

Meanwhile, Captain Starr had learned of the capture of his brother by a mystifying radio message. With Lieutenant Jerry Smith he had started out, in a converted ore-carrier—the only ship at hand—to rescue the imperiled trio.

In his reckless haste to reach the Moon City, Captain Starr cracked up at the bottom of a shaft that connected the moon's surface with its interior.

The ore-carrier was smashed beyond repair and Jerry Smith emerged from the wreck with a broken arm and a disabled knee.

But Captain Starr was able to carry on afoot. He had not left Smith far behind, however, before he was confronted with the *Meteor IV*, which was returning to the moon's face. Starr prepared to die, for he believed the stolen cruiser to be manned by moon-men.

In the meantime, Steele had learned that the half-alive mummies were Yultats, under mental control of the Xinthquuls—deathless brain giants. The Yultats had no minds of their own.

The Ten were bent on terrestrial conquest, and Steele was offered the choice of helping willingly or by force. He appeared to fall in with the moon-men, so as to have a chance to escape, intending to return armed to free his comrades.

When Steele came across the stolen cruisers, he bowled over intervening Yultats and sprang to the conning-tower of the nearest one, before the mummy-men could stop him. He stepped inside the control room, then froze in horror.

The control room was devoid of instruments; the ship had been dismantled.

12. Steele Escapes

STEELE, his face now set grimly, his lips a thin, hard line, turned slowly to face the Yultats. By this time every Yultat within sight had dropped his work and was hurrying toward the *Thunderbolt*. Steele's eyes swept around in a quick, wide circle. Not very far away lay the *America VII*, also probably dismantled, and beyond that, the *Meteor IV*. And Steele saw his chance.

How long he had been in the Moon City he could not tell, but he knew it could not have been long enough for the Yultats to denude the control room of the *Meteor IV*. If he could but reach her!

The pavement around the *Thunderbolt* now swarmed with Yultats; some had even reached the ship-ladder and were scaling it. Steele longed for even one of the four pistols in his vanished weapon-belt, but his desperate eyes, searching for some sort of weapon, could only find a bar of steel lying upon the floor of the control room. Yet the Yultats did not seem to possess even so primitive a weapon as that.

Steele snatched up the bar and jumped hard as he could, just as the first of the mummy-men reached the top of the ship-ladder. From the uppermost part of the *Thunderbolt's* hull the Earthman shot completely over the heads of the intervening Yultats and covered half the distance to the *America VII* ere he touched the ground. Scrambling to his feet in a flash, Steele was off toward his goal, jabbing, crushing, pounding a way through the ranks of the Yultats who tried to hinder him.

Swinging the bar in a rapid circle of death and destruction, he bore down upon his practically defenseless antagonists and rammed them asunder. But as he reached the side of the *America VII*, Steele perceived a thick mass of Yultats ahead

through which he could not possibly smash his way. A glance to the rear showed him another equally solid wave of running mummy-men. He was hemmed in, caught between the two mobs!

Then it was that his muscles, accustomed to Earth's greater gravity pull, stood him in good stead. Steele put all his strength into a great leap. As though he had been shot from a gun, the Earthman soared high above the advancing horde and landed squarely atop the rounded hull of the *America VII*.

As he hit the ship his feet shot out from under him on the sloping metal surface. He clutched at a projection to save himself from falling, and in doing so, let go the steel bar, which dropped, clanging, to the pavement below at the feet of a band of Yultats. For an instant Steele thought he was fated to follow his weapon, but he finally managed to drag himself to temporary safety near the ship's conning-tower.

A single brief look showed Steele that her control room was bare, and this time not even a convenient bar of steel disclosed itself. He was trapped securely; escape seemed out of the question.

Best to die fighting, though, he told himself, as he clung, panting, to the conning-tower. Far better to die swiftly than to become a Yultat, a dead-alive thing, for eternity. Steele aimed a kick at a repulsive head that was appearing above the top of the ship-ladder, then wheeled to face the *Meteor IV* now so near, yet so utterly beyond reach. With his last bit of strength, he sprang hopelessly toward his unattainable goal.

A horde of Yultats swarmed over the Earthman as he landed, preventing him by sheer weight of numbers from doing further harm. In a trice, a dozen pairs of arms had him in grips of steel, and he was lifted and carried helplessly off in the direction of the inner city. He was captured.

FINDING he could not move his body a fraction of an inch, Steele lay quiet, racking his brain for a plan whereby he might accomplish a quick death. Funny the Xinthquuls didn't order their slaves to remove his thought-helmet, Steele mused, but then they were probably too busy controlling the mobs of Yultats to bother with details.

Thought-helmet! Control!

Why hadn't he thought of that before? What a fool he had been, for not trying this newly formulated plan before! Of course, it might not work, but if it did, the trick would snatch victory from defeat. Out of the corner of his eye Steele saw that he was being carried past the *Meteor IV;* he was at the ideal spot for the execution of his plan. So without further delay he set to work.

First he must get his hands free to work the dial of his thought-helmet, to set it so that he could commune with the Yultats. He was puzzled only for a moment as to how he was to do this; then a way suggested itself to him.

Lustily, with all the power his lungs could command, the Earthman began singing the latest tune of the day. To the Yultats—or, more strictly speaking, to their controllers, the Xinthquuls—music was an unknown thing. And it is to be doubted that, even though they had been acquainted with song, they would have recognized their captive's obstreperous, discordant bellowings as such.

But Steele's stentorian caterwauling had its desired effect. The Yultats stopped dead in their tracks, turning dull, lack-luster eyes upon the Earthman. Cautiously, carefully, they began lowering him to the ground, considerably loosen-

ing their grip. Yet Steele remained motionless, still singing his clamorous song.

Up to this time he had held himself rigid; now with one final outburst he climaxed his song by allowing his body to become suddenly limp. He sagged heavily and felt himself slowly slipping from the grasp of the Yultats. The Xinthquuls must have been utterly dumfounded at Steele's noisy bellow, followed as it was by the quick relaxing of previously tense muscles; certainly they must have been considerably puzzled.

Then with a whoop, Steele jerked himself erect, wrenching loose from the lax grip of the Yultats. With a bound, he was free of that group before they had recovered the power of motion. He was still a considerable distance away from the *Meteor IV*, though, and a now slowly turning mob of Yultats separated him from it.

But the spot where he stood was momentarily free of the half-alive creatures who had once been men, and this gave him the brief time needed to set the controlling-dial of his helmet. Then he concentrated hard.

It worked!

One of the Yultats that had been carrying him was about to pounce upon him as the Earthman sent out his concentrated thought impulses. The Yultat stopped short not two feet away from Steele, then wheeled and headed back to his fellows. As he met the advancing group of mummy-men, he swung heavily and sent one of his erstwhile helpers crashing to the ground. The others soon stopped also, and in a moment they were all inextricably mixed in a vicious brawl.

Steele laughed aloud at the success of his attempt to usurp the mental control of the Xinthquuls, and began running in the direction of the *Meteor IV*. As a magnet attracts iron, the Yultats were beginning to close in on the Earthman. But as each group drew within a certain distance, Steele's thought-commands overcame those of the Xinthquuls, with the result that all around Steele's immediate vicinity the causeway was filled with madly fighting Yultats.

However, this could not keep up. The pace was too steep for Steele's mentality to cope with. He was soon compelled to walk very slowly to concentrate his energies further in warding off the Yultats. Sweat trickled down his face, while, as soon as he had passed, the Yultats ceased their fighting and joined the others of their kind in pursuit.

Soon the weary Earthman was held at bay, completely encircled by groups of battling Yultats; yet hundreds more were pressing forward, hemming him in. His powers of mental control were pitifully limited.

He was just about to give up, to admit he was beaten, when a brilliant idea came to him. Changing his mental command, Steele forced the near-by Yultats to stop fighting and rush to his side. Quickly they picked him up and dashed as fast as they could run toward the *Meteor IV*, whose blue-black hull loomed close at hand.

Without bothering at all about the distant Yultats out of his range, Steele made as many of those near him as his weakening powers of command would permit come rushing to him. Soon he was the middle of a multitude of Yultats, packed closely together, and running smoothly in triangular formation. The Earthman had made himself the center of a human wedge!

Try as they might, the Yultats under control of the Xinthquuls could not force their way through the ranks of Steele's protectors to lay hands upon him, but were turned ruthlessly aside or trampled

underfoot by the Earthman's efficient bodyguard. And it was in this strange manner that Steele at last obtained the goal he had been striving so vainly to reach, borne to his destination on the shoulders of the slaves of his enemies!

JUST as he was triumphantly scaling the ship-ladder of the *Meteor IV*, after having been carefully set down by his bearers, something occurred which nearly spelled disaster for the Earthman's brilliantly conceived and executed plan.

One of the Yultats some distance away had but recently emerged from the underground laboratories to join the chase. In his hand he carried a tiny container of the greenish gas of suspended animation. Waiting for the precise moment when Steele's protectors halted by the Legion cruiser, he had then hurled his vial at the ship. The creature's aim was good, and the little bottle smashed on the metal hull of the space-ship just above Steele's head at the moment he set foot on the lowest rung of the ladder leading to the conning-tower. The Earthman saw a cloud of shining mist spring suddenly into being directly above him, but he was not to be caught again at this last moment. He instantly recognized the gas Starr had warned him about; so, gulping down a deep breath of clear, cold air, Steel mounted the ladder in a single bound, and in a twinkling had dived into the control room, banging the door to behind him. He was safely enclosed in an absolutely air-tight chamber.

The Earthman breathed a prayer of thankfulness that came from the bottom of his heart. Outside of the fact that all the weapons that habitually ornamented the cruiser were missing, nothing in the conning-tower of the *Meteor IV* had been touched. He flung himself at the control-board.

With a lurch, the *Meteor IV* lifted off the stone pavement and soared high into the air, half-way to the cavern roof. Two or three Yultats who had grabbed at the rising ship and found hand-holds, soon let go to drop back upon the heads of their fellows far below.

The first thing Steele did was to shoot over to that part of the city where Lieutenant Starr was stationed. But when he hovered momentarily over the spot where he had last seen his fellow Earthman, he found that area devoid of life. The mummy-men had rushed Jack off to some inside hide-away, until Steele was taken care of.

But there was something left. A whine of constantly rising pitch denoted the presence of the flame-gun which was warming up, preparatory to going into action. Steele dived frantically at the controls as the ship's walls began to become red-hot, and like a streak of jagged light the cruiser swept in a zigzag course across the cave of light and entered the ragged black opening of the tunnel mouth ere the Yultats could again train their death-dealing weapons upon the escaping Earthman, inside his fleet ship.

From the other side of the city, a shiny new ship jerked erratically skyward, like a dying moth, then crashed heavily back upon the thick carpet of moon-weed below. The Earthman was free of pursuit; the moon-men were not yet fully able to control their own ships.

13. Betrayed

"SIZZLING suns! Starr, don't shoot! It's Steele—Rusty Steele of the Legion!"

Captain Richard Starr stood aghast. Slowly, bewilderedly, he returned the pistols with which he had been covering the *Meteor IV* to their holsters.

"*You*, Lieutenant?" he cried hoarsely,

while a thrill of relief surged through him.

"Yes sir. I've just come from the Moon City. We've got to get back to the Station as fast as possible."

Starr scaled the ladder to the conning-tower in a flash and tumbled inside the control room. The two stood in silence for a time, eyeing each other. It would have been exceedingly difficult to tell which was the dirtiest. Their once splendid scarlet tunics and white trousers were scarcely more than tattered, besmeared masses of rags. Starr's head with its grotesque patch of blood-stained bandages was rivalled by that of Steele, whose sweat-matted hair, escaping from underneath the thought-helmet, was plastered against his still perspiring face.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Steele," grinned Captain Starr, at last. "You are certainly a sight for sore eyes!"

"Well, if I may say so, sir," quoth Steele, grimacing back at the grimy apparition before him, "you're a sight yourself, although I'm not sure about the 'sore eyes' part!"

They both laughed a bit, then ceased guiltily, as each thought of the precious minutes he was wasting, instead of carrying on with his vital mission: the one to rescue his brother, the other to warn Earth of her impending doom.

"Let's get started, sir," said Steele, reaching for the controls. "It's a long way back and it's very urgent that I get to the Station at once. I'll tell you what's doing on the way up. I have a big job ahead of me, setting up a weapon, when we get back to Headquarters. I radioed the boys to get the parts ready for me, but——"

"Wait, Steele," Captain Starr interrupted. "Tell me about Jack. Is he all right? Tell me now, before you start the ship. I'm not going back with you!"

"But sir! You can't——"

"I told you I am not going back to the Station with you! I am not going to turn back now that I am so near to him. Hurry up and tell me all that is important about Jack and the moon-men, that has occurred since he sent his last message. Quickly!"

Seeing that his superior was not to be dissuaded from his mad attempt to continue on his way to the Moon City, Steele hastily related all the incredible events necessary to give Starr a full understanding of what had occurred down in the inner world, while he had been held captive there by the mind-vampires.

His recital finished, Steele paused for breath, looking quizzically at his captain.

"Sir," Steele began again, persistently, "hadn't you better return to the surface with me now, and later——"

"No!" Starr cut him off short. "I am all the more determined to get to Jack, now that I have learned that the moon-men are more hostile than I thought at first. With the unexpected turn events have taken, I can not be certain how long I have to save him. Quick, give me your helmet!"

Steele, with some difficulty on account of the way the thing was jammed on, removed his thought-helmet, and handed it doubtfully to Starr.

"Do you think you can use it, sir?" he asked dubiously.

"No. But it will prevent those vampires from stealing my mind. Hurry now, and get me a life-shell! Hurry!"

Without further parley, Steele opened a trap-door in the floor of the cabin and pulled a lever on the control-panel. In an instant a shiny life-shell—one of those slim metal space cylinders that every cruiser is supplied with for emergency use—slid into place under the floor-opening.

As Starr, after patting his weapon belt

to make sure all his pistols were in place, slipped down into the cramped quarters of the two-passenger life-preserver, the thought-helmet on his head seemed to glint reassuringly to the staring lieutenant.

"Pick up Lieutenant Smith on your way to the surface," Starr called, just his head appearing above the floor. "He's camping at the bottom of the big shaft. And now I am off. Good-bye."

With these succinct sentences, Starr drew his metal-enclosed head inside the life-shell and sealed himself within. The last he saw of Steele was a round, open-mouthed face surmounted by a tangle of rust-red curls.

In a flash, though, the lieutenant awoke to action. With a quick jab at the control studs, he caused the life-shell to be catapulted along its oiled groove and out from the hull of the mother ship. Starr, inside the slender craft, was busy at the controls and the tiny cylinder shot down the dark tunnel, quickly vanishing around a bend in the passage.

Without further loss of time, Steele nosed the *Meteor IV* swiftly up the tunnel toward the shaft and Headquarters. He had a big task ahead of him, and the sooner he was at work the better.

IT WAS not long before Starr in his speedy little life-shell was shooting out of the black tunnel-mouth into the cave of light. So quickly had he reached his destination, in fact, that he found himself drawing close to the high walls of the Moon City without even having had time to think of a plan of war. However, he was in no mood to tarry long on the outside of the wheel-shaped city and he decided to chance all in a single bold stroke.

Tremendous odds: one man against a city!

Having found that gate on the other side of which Steele had told him his brother was working, Starr eased his craft to the spongy carpet of moon-weed just outside the city wall. Leaving the entrance port of the life-shell standing wide open, Starr leaped lightly to the ground and stood, ankle-deep in phosphorescence, before the mighty gate of metal.

The Earthman, having decided to resort to a rash plan of swift action, speedily flashed one of the four pistols from his weapon-belt and aimed it at the huge closed portal in front of him. The squat, ugly-looking pistol in his steady grip was his most powerful weapon—a blastor.

Without hesitation or pause, the man of the Legion squeezed the trigger of the blastor and held it firmly down, expending all its fearful energy at one shot. A livid, searing streak of jagged light leapt, crackling, from the weapon straight toward the heavy barrier in the wall. The blinding energy-beam, of terrific power, played for a long moment over the metal surface, snapping angrily all the while. Suddenly the high gate began to buckle; it seemed to writhe and twist under the awful impact of the blastor's beam. Several rills of molten metal appeared at the base of the portal. The whole gate shone white-hot for a few instants, then crumpled into a shrivelled mass of glowing metal, and dropping to the ground, lay sizzling amidst the moon-weed. So great was the heat of the metal now, at the climax of the charge from Starr's pistol, that soon naught was left of the gate but a fiery pool of liquid.

A single tremendous bound carried Starr through the white-hot aperture in the wall to the inside of the city. Having had his clothes scorched and his skin blistered during the brief time he had spent in the air in his leap through the now open stonework in the wall, Starr felt perfectly certain that should a Yultat attempt to get to the life-shell within the

next ten minutes, his legs would be burned to cinders beneath him. But the Yultats apparently did not have any such intention. They stopped whatever they had been doing and stood stock-still as Starr strode unwaveringly straight ahead.

He cast anxiously about him for a sight of the scarlet and white uniform of his brother. At the same instant he discerned a man in the red tunic of the Legion, Starr saw out of the corner of his eye that a considerable mass of Yultats were surreptitiously edging toward the gate to cut off the Earthman's retreat.

Wheeling swiftly, Starr sent the last tremendous bolt of his blastor flickering savagely straight into the midst of the host of Yultats. A moment of lambent, crackling flame and smoke; then the air became filled with whirling ashes and rock chips. The acrid odor of burnt flesh came sickeningly to Starr's nostrils.

This took care of the majority of Yultats in the immediate vicinity. The area was a deserted one, as Starr gratefully observed. He carefully returned the empty blastor to its holster, since he had not the means of recharging it with him at the time, and drew his slug- and flame-pistols in its stead.

KEEPING up a desultory fire from first one then another of the guns, to keep the Yultats at a distance, Starr advanced to his brother's side. The younger Starr had been engaged in scooping up little measures of water from a running streamlet and mixing them into strangely tinted pastes which were continually passing him on an endless belt. Now, though, Jack raised dull eyes to his brother's face and rose jerkily to his feet. A slow smile grew upon his face.

"Jack!" cried Captain Starr joyously, but he was wary of the other's vacant eyes and mechanical smile.

Starr inserted his pistols each into its holster and stretched forth a welcoming hand. Yet he was alert for trouble. He was not quite sure whether or not the Xinthquuls were trying to trick him.

And lucky it was for Captain Starr that he had anticipated danger, for while his brother's eyes stared dully into his own and a thin smile played upon his lips, the younger Starr's fists were clenched and his biceps twitching.

"Jack!" moaned the captain aloud to his apparently unhearing brother. "Jack! Don't do that! You mustn't hit me! No! It's your brother, Jack—it's Dick! Dick! Don't you see? It's Dick! You——"

But at that instant Jack launched a bone-crushing blow aimed at his brother's face.

"Jack! Don't!" Again the captain pleaded as he sidestepped.

But Jack merely turned and shot out another fist.

"Jack, forgive me! I don't want to, but I've *got* to," cried Captain Starr, and ducked, at the same time ramming his shoulder into the other's midsection. He was using an old trick he had learned while a boy in training-school.

With an upward surge of his body, the elder Starr thrust his attacker heavily backward, throwing the latter off his balance. Then before the younger man could steady himself, Captain Starr snapped his lithe body sideways, bringing his arm up in a mighty swing with the same movement.

Captain Starr's hard fist caught his brother on the point of his upthrust jaw. With a painful grunt that seared the captain's heart like a red-hot knife, the younger man careened backward off his feet, landing on the stone causeway in a crumpled heap.

Gathering up the senseless Jack and slinging him over one shoulder, Captain

Starr pivoted and strode off in the direction of the gate. Since the Xinthquuls could not control an unconscious man's mind, he knew that Jack would offer no resistance for awhile. By the time Jack would come around, the captain hoped to be safely on his way back to the moon's crust, out of reach of the ghastly mind-vampires.

Continually peppering the crowd of Yultats with heavy slugs that nearly tore their heads off their bodies, Captain Starr managed to stave off an attack until he had nearly reached the still-glowing hole in the wall. Then an ominous grinding snarl caused him to stiffen to a figure of stone, while the hair on the back of his neck rose like the quills of a porcupine. His blood was chilled in his veins.

For that rapidly scaling whine behind him told the seasoned soldier that in one of the near-by buildings a huge flame-gun was warming up. At Captain Starr's faltering feet was a softly glowing circle of light, the sighting-beam of the monster death-machine. The finger of Death was pointing at the two escaping Earthmen now, and no mistake!

The flame-gun's rising whine would at any instant now be almost beyond pitch of the human ear, and when that moment came Captain Starr and his precious burden would be no more. Already a torturing tingling was twisting along his spine, Captain Starr realized, and went into action.

With every bit of speed he could muster, the captain bent low, threw himself aside out of the circle of death, and, allowing Jack to sink to the ground, drew two pistols from his weapon-belt. He squeezed both triggers.

Out of one a single slug whined harmlessly high into the air. From the other sang a tiny sphere of flame straight for the crew of the monster gun on the balcony of one of the tall stone buildings. Thrusting the slug-pistol back into its holster in a single movement, Starr whipped out his last remaining pistol—a pow-pow.

The little globule of flame had touched the very tip of the Yultats' weapon and flared into a livid sheet of destruction. There was a sharp crack like that of breaking crystal, and the sighting-beam of the big machine, smoking strangely, went out. The crew of two Yultats standing around the flame-gun dropped from the balcony to the street below, two burnt and blackened corpses. More Yultats quickly filled their places.

Yet still that ominous whine from the squat weapon of the moon-men. But now Captain Starr, in spite of a numbing, agonizing shock which was coursing through his veins, took careful aim with his pow-pow and sent one of its shells at the flame-gun.

Pow!

A direct hit! The flame-gun sprang apart, exploded like a bursting bubble. A jagged piece of metal came hurtling past Captain Starr and through the open gateway to bury itself among the glowing weeds there. The only trace left of the machine on the balcony was a blackened, smoking area on the stone.

A second later Starr went diving out the aperture in the city wall. He and Jack were safe! There was not one of the Yultats whose muscles would allow him to jump across that broad area of terrifically heated stone. Jubilantly, Captain Starr piled his unconscious brother into the cramped space of the little two-man life-shell. Fortune had indeed smiled upon him, Captain Starr was thinking, and he was heartily congratulating himself on his good luck in escaping so easily, when a sudden popping of moon-weed

caused him to pause with one leg inside the life-shell and look back.

The Earthman's taste of sweet triumph turned to bitter ashes. There, ankle-deep in moon-weed, stood Lieutenant Bradley, two pistols in his hands. The cunning of the Xinthquuls had triumphed at the eleventh hour! They knew that while a true Yultat could not leap the lane of hot stone, a mentally controlled Earthman with his stronger muscles could.

And so it was that Bradley stood, guns in hand, eyes now glinting with the lust to kill, about to fire upon his own comrades!

14. Crucifixion

"UNBUCKLE your weapon-belt, Outsider, and throw it upon the ground at my feet," flatly intoned the menacing Bradley. "If you try any trickery, I shall not hesitate to fire both guns at you."

The commonplace phraseology of the command did not strike Captain Starr as interesting at the moment. His brain was working with lightning-like rapidity, seeking some way to ward off imminent death. He did not doubt in the least that the enslaved Bradley would, if necessity demanded, carry out his threat.

Starr would have unhesitatingly flung himself at the threatening lieutenant, but, half in and half out of the life-shell as he was, he could not do anything swiftly. Then, as he fumbled with the buckle of his weapon-belt, he thought he saw his chance. Cautiously he swung the pivoted searchlight of the shell until it pointed at Bradley, concealing the act under the movements his body went through as he wriggled out of the broad white weapon-girdle.

Captain Starr stood apparently motionless with the heavy belt in his hand for a moment, as if reluctant to drop it to the ground. But, under cover of the side of the life-shell, his right foot was feeling for the guide-beam switch on the control-panel.

Suddenly the brilliant guide-beam flashed out from the searchlight, sending its dazzling light full into the face of Bradley. At the same instant, Starr swung the girdle in his hand in a sweeping arc and let it shoot out of his grasp.

As the rays of the guide-beam struck Bradley, his muscles reacted with such involuntary swiftness that the controlling Xinthquuls were taken by surprize. They were a fraction of a second too late in causing Bradley's fingers to press the triggers of his pistols. The man's arms had jerked up in front of his face to shield his eyes just before the guns went off. And then Starr's hurtling weapon-belt wrapped itself about Bradley's head and sent him sprawling backward to the ground.

One of the slugs from the enslaved Earthman's guns whistled high over Starr's head, but the other smacked into the searchlight. Instantly the beam went out amidst a jangle of smashing glass, while the searchlight's fragments whizzed in all directions. A chunk of metal tore past Starr's forehead and but for the protecting helmet would have ended his life then and there. As it was, he was blinded by a spurt of blood in his eyes from a cut on the forehead received as the metal bounced off. His left hand, which had been grasping the searchlight, was smashed and bleeding; the thumb was lacking from its upper joint.

In spite of the pulsing pain, Starr forced himself over the side of the shell and flung his arms around Bradley while the latter was yet entangled in the weapon-belt. The wounded Starr's good right hand encircled Bradley's throat and tightened like a contracting steel band.

In his fury, the captain would have choked out the life of the fallen man but for a sudden overpowering surge of weakness. He was losing blood and his strength was fast ebbing. He realized that even should he gain the safety of the shell, he would in all likelihood faint ere he could get out of the cave of light.

But he must save Jack; get him to the Station at all costs. Bradley and himself were not so important. But Jack must be saved.

The man beneath him wriggled to free himself. Starr shot him a look and felt his problem was solved. He ripped off the protective thought-helmet and quickly thrust it on Bradley's head. Instantly the latter ceased his struggles; he was full master of himself again.

"Listen, Bradley," Starr hissed in the dazed young man's ear before the Xinthquuls tore down his will and secured control over his mind. "Listen, Bradley! Get in that life-shell and get out of here as fast as you can. Lieutenant Starr is inside. He's hurt; get him up to the Station as fast as you can possibly make it. No questions now. You'll understand later; hurry and do as I say!"

Starr felt the insidious suggestions of the moon-men eating at his mind and steeled himself against them. But he knew he could not long hold out; soon he would, against his will, hurl himself at the throat of the young man before him. With difficulty he spoke.

"Did you hear my command? Get going, sir!"

Bradley's military training came to his rescue. Without the faintest conception of what the situation was, he found his blank mind being filled with but the one idea supplied to it by the Captain. Obediently he wheeled.

"Yes, sir!" he snapped and was in the life-shell in a trice. The hatch slammed shut and the tiny two-passenger spaceship shot like a bolt across the cave of light and flashed out of view into the yawning tunnel-mouth.

At any rate, though he must pay for it with his own life, Jack and Bradley were safe. That was some consolation, Starr thought as he found himself involuntarily striding toward the wall of the Moon City. He strove to direct his movements, but to no avail; in a moment more his mind had been completely swallowed by the Xinthquuls.

DIMLY, although for the most part the next eight hours were a hideous, pain-filled blackness, Captain Starr felt his body being subjected to all sorts of tortures.

As soon as he had been brought to the inner city, the Xinthquuls caused him to be disrobed and placed in a peculiar metal cylinder. Then the hypnotized Earthman was treated with throbbing, pulsing rays and crackling electric currents. For a long time, flickering pencils of blue and purple sprang from queer machines to caress the body in the cylinder with eery tenderness. Strange tinglings and muscle-pulling twinges coursed through Starr's inert form. Then at last it was all over.

But Starr did not awake to consciousness. Instead, he walked like one in sleep from the room whose air was permeated with the acrid tang of ozone to a long metal hall upon the walls of which were shelf after shelf of scientific instruments of a surgical nature. Two dull-eyed mummy-men strapped his body securely to a sort of table. Then the veil was withdrawn from the Earthman's mind and he became again a person.

Starr found his body to be in splendid condition. He felt absolutely no pain or ache in any part of his anatomy. The cure he had been subjected to had been a

marvelous one indeed. However, he did not long muse over past events, for into his brain trickled, like a physical stream of icy water, the following thoughts:

"Outsider"—Starr's mind felt as though it were being exposed to the chill of space—"Outsider, listen to my thoughts. First let me assure you that it was not through a feeling of compassion that you were revitalized. It was because my own body met with an unfortunate accident. I was in the space-ship that crashed when we made an attempt to prevent the escape of one of your fellow beings.

"Although my body was completely smashed, my brain was unharmed. Since I am one of the Ten it is imperative that I be kept alive. Therefore my brain was removed and sealed in a brain-case while a hurried search was made for a body suitable for it. We were going to utilize the fellow Bradley's, but he had to be used to fight you and escaped. I was forced to take you and recharge your rather unlovely body. However, you will have to do until I can get a better one.

"Now, from my brain-case on this shelf at your left, I shall direct the delicate operation of removing your meager brain from your head and substituting for it my own. Do not attempt to struggle, for you are bound in such a way that you are powerless to move. I am about to begin now, and please do not lapse into unconsciousness from the pain until you have to, for it will be fascinating to study your mind's reactions to the various stages of the operation. Farewell, Outsider; your present life has about run its course, and you will soon be back into free Time!"

Although Starr manifested no outward sign of emotion, due to his constricting bonds, he was seething inwardly. The dull speech of doom had been delivered in a toneless, calm manner to the Earthman as though the usurpation of his mind was a trifling occurrence. Under the goad of the pulsing thought-message of the Xinthquul, Starr's mind was in a turmoil, a fever of rage. The nearly demented Earthman must lie helpless while an automaton, a mindless Yultat, cut out his brain under the guidance of a moon-brain reposing in a gleaming metal tank on a shelf across the room; and though the pain of each cut of the pitiless surgeon's knife would surge through his dying brain to be read with cold, scientific delight by the Xinthquuls, the Earthman would be able only to cry out his agony on the rack.

The Yultat, bent low over the Earthman and with eyes dully expressionless as ever, was beginning to operate. The sweat-bedewed forehead of the tormented man had been bathed with some preparation of the moon-men and now the scalpel was being raised. Its keen-edged blade flashed menacingly in the white light of the room. The knife-point pierced Starr's skin and slowly began to cut its way across his forehead. The Earthman's torture-twisted brain could no longer withstand the probing, anguishing knife-point; the demon-wings of pain brushed Starr into the ocean of hideous nightmare, to be drowned in awful torment.

15. Doom

BY THE time Lieutenant Jack Starr had regained consciousness, Bradley was nosing the little life-shell into the airlock at the Station. They did not tarry long there. During a hasty meal, the two bewildered men listened to an excited, nervous Rusty Steele.

Steele was chafing at the very necessary delay forced upon him by the time required to erect his weapon and set it up inside the control room of the Petrovsky super-ship that had eventually arrived at Moon Headquarters. Amid the bustle

and confusion of the toiling men working on the Petrovsky, Steele found time to tell all the recent arrivals—both the two men who had escaped from the Moon City and the three officers sent from Earth on the emergency ship—of his plan for getting Starr safely out of the clutches of the mind-vampires.

Steele's mysterious weapon was at last ready and installed in the Petrovsky's conning-tower. The speed with which the deed was done would have astounded the anxious Earthman had he not been in so great a hurry to get down inside the satellite to the inner world.

At any rate, the Petrovsky shoved off from the Station a scant seven hours after it had arrived. But now aboard her was every available Legionnaire at the Station; her every cabin was crowded with men and weapons. If Steele's weapon failed, the Earthmen were prepared to make a battle of it anyway. By mutual consent, Steele himself took control of the ship, although aboard her was a Major Whitehead who officially should have been in command. Steele nosed the speedy craft down the black lunar tunnels with almost reckless speed. All knew only too well that if Captain Richard Starr were yet alive his life was far from secure.

Like a bullet the silent speed-ship tore down the pit of the giant staircase and down the black horizontal tunnel at its bottom. Although it was with almost unbelievable speed that the Petrovsky had been brought almost to the entrance to the cave of light, it seemed to the despairing comrades of the captured Richard Starr like eternity before Steele had cut off the guide-beam and begun to decelerate the slim cruiser. At last the ship rested on the uneven floor of the tunnel just within the shelter of the tunnel-mouth, with the cave of light and its wheel-shaped Moon City in full view.

Without a word, while the rest of the company of rescuers stared across the haze of the cave of light at the incredible Moon City, Steele set to work upon his strange-looking machine.

"Hadn't we better get a little closer, Rusty?" suggested Jack Starr anxiously.

"No. Here, look through this 'scope. See that gun on the wall there? It's aimed squarely at the mouth of this tunnel. We'd get no more than half-way into the cave before we'd be blasted out of existence. That gun is a new one; the one they used on me was farther back."

"I guess they haven't seen us, so far," put in Bradley. "But suppose they do find out in some way that we're here and try to get our minds. You know, one man running amuck in this craft could ruin us in no time. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," replied Steele without looking up from the wiring he was working on. "Yes, I've taken care of that. Here, Bradley, you take this key and unlock that cabinet in the wall. It contains a bunch of improvised helmets that I think will alter all thought-impulses sent or received to such an extent that they will be rendered harmless. You see, I don't want any one here to send out waves that will conflict in any way with the ones I am sending. Here, Jack, hand me that coil, will you?

"Now," Steele addressed the assemblage after all had donned the odd protective helmets taken from the locker, "this is the idea. Thought is merely a disturbance in the ether, set up by the brain. It differs from other etheric impulses only because of its peculiar wave-length. I have not time now to go into detail, but here before you is a machine which will amplify all thought-impulses sent out by my brain to a very high degree. I think I shall be able to control

my thoughts by sending them along a directional beam, but if you should feel queer things going on inside your heads in spite of those helmets I gave you, do not be alarmed. But no more delay, to battle! Wish me luck!"

THE stillness of interstellar space seemed to fill the crowded control room as the round-eyed officers watched the red-headed man before them don a peculiar set of what resembled ear-phones.

Steele's usually smooth forehead creased itself into many wrinkles and his eyes closed to mere slits with the force of his concentration. He was thinking hard on a mental command, and the magic of his instrument was wafting that thought out over the ether straight to the citadel of the mind-sucking Xinthquuls.

For a long instant he sat, taut as a stretched wire, fingers slowly pushing on a tiny nickeled lever on the control-board of the thought-amplifier. Through his nearly closed eyes the Earthman could just see the faint glow of his directional beam quivering out from the Petrovsky to the Moon City in a delicately probing finger.

The eyes of the hushed officers were fastened almost in awe upon the deeply lined, agonized face of Lieutenant Steele. The intense concentration of the young man seemed to crystallize about the space-ship like a solid thing.

Then the watchers saw a smile—an expression of triumph—appear on Steele's face; he relaxed with a long sigh. Yet he still was careful to keep the lever of the amplifier well down.

"Sizzling suns!" he yelped delightedly. "I'll bet I nearly blew those infernal moon-men's brains out! I was worrying about not being able to overcome the whole bunch at once, but after I got the Ten by the ears the rest was easy. I sent out such a strong wave that I think I must have paralyzed them at first. But we're all right now. I can hold them for a long time yet. Happy days! I'll bet that the Ten are in a sweat now all right!"

"But Richard! Did you get Dick?" demanded the younger Starr impatiently.

"You bet! I had a couple of Yultats grab hold of him and chuck him in one of those shiny new space-ships of theirs and bring him out. I had 'em park their bus right alongside this one."

But Jack Starr had left before Steele had half finished. It took the lad but an instant to fling open the door of the Petrovsky and leap to the conning-tower of the moon ship. He soon had that door also wrenched open and was on his knees beside his brother's form on the floor in another swift movement.

"Dick! Dick! Speak to me!"

"What are you yelling so loud for, you young idiot? Do you want to have the whole gang of moon-men on us?" Captain Richard Starr's voice was weak, but it was as music to Jack's ears. The elder man struggled to a sitting position and placed a hand gingerly on his forehead.

"Dick, you're hurt!" Jack had seen the long thin red line that ran from temple to temple on the captain's forehead. "What were they doing to you?"

The captain rose unsteadily to his feet, waving aside the proffered arm of his brother.

"Let's get out of this, Jack. I'm not hurt badly. Something exceedingly strange must have happened just when that devil with the knife was getting well under way. What's up?"

"Tell you later, Dick. Here, hop inside this ship; the whole gang is here."

"By Jupiter!" thundered the old major upon seeing the scarred and mutilated Starr, "you'll get a promotion out of this as well as a medal and a year's leave, if

I have to resign and give you my place!"

"Hey, everybody," bellowed Steele as soon as Starr had been doctored up a bit, "let's get started. I'm hungry."

But Bradley, who had been sitting quietly in a corner thinking, now looked up and spoke.

"What are we going to do about the moon-men? As soon as you leave that amplifier things will start to happen. The Xinthquuls will regain full mental control of themselves, and you know what they'll do then. They may not be able to fly their ships yet, but they'll learn. They'll find a way. And once they get out of this cave no power on Earth can stop them. It will be just as they said. They weren't lying when they said that their weapons are vastly superior to ours. And if even one ship of them gets away from the power of the amplifier—Earth is doomed! *Doomed!* Why, with all the armament we can muster, we'll be absolutely at their mercy, like insects before men! Suspended animation gases . . . rotting red gas! Why, if they once loose those upon Earth, our planet will become nothing but a tomb; our entire civilization will be turned into stinking pools of decaying jelly! What power have we——"

"Here, wait a minute," interrupted Steele. "I *had* forgotten all about that, hadn't I? Bradley's right. We've got to do something. Something big. Big enough to get rid of these vampiring fiends for ever. Just what . . . *I've got it!*"

Steele pushed his power-lever all the way down, and his forehead creased in thought. "Look out that port," he urged.

One of the officers was peering out across the hazy distance to the Moon City through a telescope. He saw the huge death-machine mounted on the city wall slowly pivot until it pointed directly at the center of the citadel. The Earthman could imagine the crew of Yultats, under the powerful impulses of the amplifier, carefully aiming the weapon at the inner city of the Xinthquuls. Suddenly a livid streak of flame belched forth from the gun.

ONLY the man with the telescope could see what had happened up to this point, but now the entire assemblage saw a quick burst of scarlet billow up all about the fairy castles of the cruel moon-monsters. Like a living thing the red cloud spread, twisting and rolling over the entire Moon City. Tentacles of shimmery crimson developed from the central bubbling mass of raw color and writhed deep into all the cracks and crannies of the metal and stone edifices. At the same instant the main cloud seemed to swell and expand as if it were absorbing food into itself. A second more and the very highest spires of the doomed metropolis were hidden by a swirling, probing blanket of blood-red death. Steele laughed and threw down his head-gear. He mopped his perspiring face.

"That's the end of that. That gas will completely dissolve every single thing of organic nature in the city. Nothing in all creation could withstand such a great quantity of it. Look, it's all over now. See, the color of the gas is fading; that means that it's beginning to dissipate. I cut off the amplifier's power just as I caused the tank under the very heart of the city to be blown up. I wonder how the Ten felt when they saw that their own Yultats had sent them to destruction? I hope they knew who did it.

"Before I had ever heard of the mind vampires, I always thought wholesale killing was a crime. Now it's a pleasure! Those moon-men were worse than an insect plague back on Earth.

"We'll have to come back in a couple of days when the gas has all gone, if we want to examine the city at close range. Can't take chances with a gas like that.

"Well, what's the matter? What are you all standing there like gaping idiots for? Starr's safe. We're safe. The Moon City's ghastly inhabitants are destroyed. What are we waiting for? Let's get back to the Station as fast as this bus can go. Let's forget the excitement and get some food. I'm hungry!"

To Steele, the affair was at an end. All the breathless events of the past period were over and to be forgotten. That he, as well as Captain Starr, was due to receive a Shooting Star — the highest award that could possibly be obtained by men of the Legion, given only to the bravest of the brave—did not even occur to him. The horrible doom that had menaced Earth with hideous obliteration had been thwarted; therefore why not forget it?

Forget it! The names of Jack and Richard Starr, of Bradley, and of Steele himself would go down in history as the saviors of their planet; as men who had faced and overcome danger the like of which had never before been imagined in the history of Earth. Why, their brave deeds would be the talk of the world. Forget it, indeed!

But Rusty Steele was like that.

[THE END]

The Thunderstones of Nuflo

By RALPH ALLEN LANG

A grim story of Haitian Voodoo, of revivified corpses, and the gruesome death that stalked the deck of the yacht Oberon

THE old dark jungle gods that walk in Haiti have left strange inscriptions upon official records of the Black Republic, but few events there recorded surpass in strangeness the case of the yacht *Oberon,* found off the coast of La Gonave on the morning of September 21st, 1923, with sails furled and anchor down, but manned by a crew of dead men.

Except for her appearance of complete desertion, the *Oberon* would have attracted no immediate attention, for while appearing storm-ravaged to some extent, she still was sufficiently seaworthy. The boarding party found other marks of a violent storm she had weathered in shattered spars and a deck swept clear, but nothing to explain the staring-eyed ring of dead men grouped around the capstan, as though their last act had been to let go the anchor.

Strange it appears even to me, who know more of the facts than any other living white man. The *Oberon's* owner, De Gooch, was a friend of mine, or intimate acquaintance at least, and I had sailed with him on that last ill-fated

"The dead men were grouped around the capstan, as though their last act had been to let go the anchor."

voyage. A Frenchman, he had become interested in various phases of occultism, and especially in the darkly mysterious practises represented in African and Haitian Voodoo. It was this interest that led to our acquaintance in the first place; for I had spent several years of study in Haiti, winning in some measure the confidence and secrets of the ritualists, and he had sought me out. De Gooch was well supplied with means to gratify his whim—I scarcely think it was more than that—and I accepted his proposal because I felt that adequate financial backing would enable me to pursue my studies on a larger scale, not only in Haiti but in Africa as well. He asked only to accompany me and share whatever knowledge and experience I chanced upon; exchanging, in a word, his financial aid for the benefit of traveling with one in the confidence of the natives.

IT ALL goes back to that gray September morning when we stood at the entrance to Nuflo's *houmfort*, drawing in with relish the cool, clean air, and letting the freshness of dawn clear our eyes and brains after a night spent in the close air of the Voodoo temple, heavy with the odor of body-sweat, and stupefyingly charged with the mad pulse of the *Rada*

drums. Old Nuflo, the *papaloi,* whose fame with the thunderstones had gone abroad through the island, had exercised his weird power to relieve a drought; and rain was falling gently over the long green strath, thunder rumbling fitfully through the lowering sky. De Gooch looked a bit shaken by his experience, but there was a nervous brightness in his eyes, almost feverish, and an unreadable expression that I did not like. He excused himself on the pretext of verifying some particular point of his notes, and reentered the *houmfort,* where I saw him move to the altar and stand before it briefly. When he returned I was finishing my farewell to Nuflo, for we were to sail that day to the land of my long desire, Africa, the dark, the mysterious.

A ship's boat was waiting to take us off, and as we pulled away from the shore De Gooch's eyes gradually lost their strained expression. He leaned easily against a large knapsack he had carried ashore with him, and regarded me quizzically.

"Really, my friend," he said jestingly, "you appear almost *en famille* amongst these natives. Your farewell with yonder darky, so expressive of mutual regard, was quite striking. Is he then so great a wizard? The rain-making was convincing, I own; but one can never quite get rid of the thought that coincidence had a hand in it."

His tone and manner were lightly provoking, and I accepted the challenge in a like spirit.

"Spoken like a true skeptic," I returned, "and it must be admitted that there is some slight reasonableness in your lack of faith. Nevertheless, in the light of still more unexplainable wonders I have witnessed, my own doubts are negligible. This same Nuflo, for instance, is said to have far darker powers than those we witnessed last night. I have not seen them displayed, but am far from ready wholly to doubt."

"And what is the nature of these so extraordinary powers?" His lightly bantering tone still held.

"Among other things he is reputed to be familiar with the sorceries of the *culte des morts,* and even to be acquainted with the ghastly processes by which buried corpses are taken from the grave and by means of sorcery given the mechanical ability to walk and act as though they were alive. The active existence of these *zombies,* as they are called, is not lightly to be laughed off, being attested to not only by ignorant jungle peasants but also by many of the more enlightened natives. No matter what part of the island you may be in, you will be told, upon inquiry, that *zombies* are actually being used to work in the fields at no great distance away; and natives who have never deceived you will testify to having had visual proof of their existence. I, myself, have seen at a distance what was pointed out to me as *zombies;* plodding, shuffling figures with heads bent down, laboring in a cane-field under the close supervision of an overseer or keeper. At that distance I could not, of course, satisfy myself as to their nature, but I am satisfied that behind the *zombie* belief there is some mystery worth any effort it may cost to bring it to light. As it is now, the thing is hard either to refute or substantiate; for it is impossible to gain the confidence of these reputed keepers, and difficult even to approach them."

We reached the ship as I finished speaking, and De Gooch, impressed and interested, but smilingly quizzical, allowed the conversation to drop as we went to our cabins. The *Oberon* was already a-flutter with white sails as the crew swarmed through her rigging, and

by the time I had finished changing clothes we were under way.

The Frenchman was moody and preoccupied as we stood together watching the dark isle fade from view, and I could not help but wonder at the noticeable change in his attitude toward Voodooism, approaching indifference, which he had exhibited on the way out to the ship. His manner had appeared distrait and nervous when he had re-entered the temple, a manner quite different from the casual skepticism he had exhibited in the boat.

It was not until later in the day that I realized how completely his once seemingly authentic interest had evaporated. And it was only by accident that I learned, with anger and chagrin, what his re-entrance to the Voodoo temple had meant; the heavy price I must pay in loss of native confidence for the financial aid he had offered. While opening a bottle I had suffered a slight cut from broken glass, and remembering the first-aid kit De Gooch habitually carried in his knapsack, I went to his cabin to get it. There my hand encountered, as though of no more consequence than hotel souvenirs, nothing less than the thunderstones of Nuflo.

FORGETTING the medicine kit, I made my way on deck to where he was talking with the captain.

"This is the end of our relationship," I told him hotly. "I see my folly in thinking it possible to pursue my studies in company with one whose only prevailing interest in the Voodoo religion seems to be curiosity. Put about the ship! We are going to return these to where they belong, and then we part company."

Anger struggled with shame in his face, and finally merged into an expression that can only be described as a particularly evil nastiness.

"But what have I to gain by turning back?" he grimaced, in a manner that was wrath-provoking. "Leave me you shall, I promise you, but it will be on the shores of Africa, or more probably France; for I begin to lose taste for this business that so fascinates you."

Turning from him I made my demand to the captain, a phlegmatic Hollander. To my protestation he declared that although he was master of the ship while on the open sea he had nothing to say regarding its destination, a matter which was up to the owner, De Gooch. Nothing was to be gained from him, and I turned away with the intention of securing the thunderstones at least, to keep until I was able to return them to their rightful owner.

Divining my intention, De Gooch sprang forward, and we arrived at the cabin together. To my consternation the knapsack containing the stones was gone!

Under the surprize of it we both stood nonplussed and bewildered for a long instant, and then I saw uncertain suspicion flick out at me from the Frenchman's eyes. My own mind was working on a different track, and occupied with the thought that had struck me, I gave no heed to his attitude.

"Check up and see whether anything else is missing," I directed sharply, and myself commenced a searching survey of the room. De Gooch followed my example without fully knowing what was in my mind, going first to examine the clothing he had taken off upon reaching the ship. Immediately I heard him utter a startled curse, and read in his features an expression of the same ugly thought that had prompted my search. He knew as well as I did the Voodoo practise of securing a garment that had been worn next to the skin of victims marked for

vengeance, to be used in a death-charm, or *ouanga*. And the shirt which had absorbed his body perspiration during that sweating night in the Voodoo *houmfort* was, like the knapsack, missing.

Neither of us could doubt that Voodoo vengeance, prompted by the theft of the thunderstones, had followed us aboard the yacht; its work already started before we were aware of its presence. De Gooch sprang to the deck and ordered an immediate search of the ship, while I examined my own effects to see if anything was missing. Apparently I was not included in the wrath directed against the Frenchman, for nothing of mine had been molested. Going on deck again I learned that the search had been fruitless, De Gooch ordering the men back for a second effort. No known nook or cranny of the yacht was left unexamined, but the second search proved as barren of results as the first.

De Gooch slumped on a deck chair, scarcely attempting to dissimulate a nervousness verging on panic. Whether his mood was infectious, or whether unrest was in the atmosphere, the men also were sullenly ill at ease, although for the most part unacquainted with the nature of our fears. A strained, waiting tension hung over the yacht like an oppressive, depressing cloud; and even my own spirits sagged as I stood at the stern-rail watching the waves darken before the approach of a starless night, with difficulty repressing a shudder at the sight of parallel fins cutting the water, a pair of sharks following the ship.

UPON retiring to my cabin for the night I found sleep difficult, the disturbing events of the day forming a barrier that effectually warded off slumber. The breeze had subsided to a mere breath during the afternoon, and the closeness of the air in my cabin seemed accentuated by the unnatural calm of the elements, vaguely oppressive to the mind. I lay fitfully tossing while the ship's bell chimed off the periods of night, its indication of the passing hours adding to my restlessness.

Finally I could stand it no longer, and slipped into my robe with the intention of going on deck. I had purposely struck no light in order that my eyes might be accustomed to the darkness of the companionway, and as I closed the door behind me I was thankful for the precaution. Far forward, nearly the ship's length away, a faint light was glowing rosily, spreading around the edges of a blob of blackness that I took to be some manner of screen intended to shield the flame from view.

Silently I crept forward, pressing as far as I could to the side in an endeavor to obtain a view behind the screen. As I drew nearer, my efforts in this were partly successful, one edge of the blaze coming into view, flanked by a crouching shadow. So uncertain was the weird light in its surrounding darkness that I could not satisfactorily make out whether this shadow was the shadow of a man, or whether it was the man himself, crouching on the opposite side of the fire, and apparently kneading something with his hands.

I was about to attempt a still closer position when gradually I became vaguely conscious of a presence other than that of myself and the man I was stalking. Certainly I heard no sound, and the blackness that enveloped everything precluded the possibility of seeing, but in some peculiar manner the intelligence was forced on me that some one was there in the darkness behind me. Apparently the figure crouching by the fire sensed something at the same time, for he jerked

suddenly erect. I had one brief, unrevealing glimpse of him, when suddenly a cry burst through the ship:

"Fire!"

Instantly the scene was alive, lights flared up, and running figures appeared from everywhere in answer to that cry which is most dreaded at sea. Immediately I sprang toward the sheltered fire and the dark figure beside it, who stooped to snatch up something as I approached. Then, as effortlessly as though he were part of the night itself, he faded away into the blackness, leaving me totally unable to tell even the direction in which he had disappeared. I turned to find De Gooch at my side. His, evidently, was the presence I had felt in the darkness, like myself stalking the mysterious flame.

With upraised hand he halted the approaching men, one of whom had raised the alarm upon seeing the glow forward. Impatiently and briefly he explained to them the mistake, ordering them back to their quarters. When we were alone again, the captain having also grumpily retired, we turned our attention to the scene of the shielded fire.

The glow had proceeded from a tiny flame kindled upon a heavy tin pannikin, and from several candles ranged around in the form of a mystic pentagram. A small mortar and pestle, together with a brazier, lay beside the fire, the former containing traces of some dark-colored decoction that had been brayed in it. Various remnants of roots and herbs lay about the brazier, among which I recognized the poisonous leaves of the manchineel tree. Plainly, it was the layout of some malignant *ouanga,* and we could have no doubt for whom it was intended. For among the remnants of other ingredients were a few shreds of white fabric, such as might have formed a part of De Gooch's missing shirt. That he recognized them as such was evidenced by the sickly pallor of his face.

His voice sounded harassed as he appealed to me:

"What do you think?"

"The same thing you do," I replied. "Voodoo vengeance is on the ship with us, bent certainly upon your destruction. Danger is present every moment the person who kindled this fire is loose on the ship, and I know nothing to counsel except extreme watchfulness. I am surprized that you did not immediately order the men to another search."

"It would have yielded nothing," he returned wearily. "The ship was thoroughly searched today, and we should find now what we found then. And I wanted them out of the way while we examined these." He indicated the Voodoo implements; and then, gathering them all upon the pannikin, he threw them over the rail.

"Watchful I shall be," he continued, accepting my counsel, "but not cowardly. I am going to bed again, and devil take the hic-hag. Come what may!" And before I could answer he left me, passing into his cabin alone. Courage, I reflected, at least was one thing he did not lack.

FOLLOWING his example, I succeeded in finally dropping into a fitful, half-waking slumber, troubled by vague dreams. When I opened my eyes again dawn was gray on the sea, and some one was shaking me awake. Without being told, I sensed fresh trouble, as though the day held but a waking continuation of my nightmare dreams of the night.

Such, in actuality, proved to be the case, for I found De Gooch pacing beside the recumbent forms of three seamen, lying on the deck where they had slept after the night's alarm. So composed were their faces that I should have im-

agined them still bound only by sleep, had not the Frenchman's manner indicated otherwise. Bending down for a closer examination, I found them pulseless and cold, having evidently been dead for some time.

De Gooch had not yet called the captain, and together we went to his cabin—only to find that the mysterious death had struck here also. As in the case of the sailors, the captain's face and form appeared perfectly composed as though in sleep, but the heart had long since ceased to beat.

Returning to the deck we found the wind freshening into the promise of a gale, the sky still continuing gray and overcast. Under the fourfold blow of death our situation had become alarming; for besides the loss of Captain Schmidt, the number of our seamen had been reduced nearly by half, the *Oberon* having been manned by a crew of seven. To go on, under the circumstances, seemed madness; and the alternative, a retracing of our course to Haiti, held equal terrors for De Gooch. He gave orders to prepare burial canvas for the dead men while we debated what to do. But there was a note in the Frenchman's tone as we talked, in harmony with the deep atmosphere of gloom that hung over the ship, which gave the impression that it mattered little what our decision might be. Port was over a day's sail distant, and death was hovering on the wings of each new hour.

The bodies of the four dead men had been laid out in their canvas on the deck, the sailors starting to stitch them in with coarse needles. I thought of "the last stitch" of which I had read in Melville, and could not suppress a shudder. But the last stitch on these bodies was destined never to be taken, the last act of our floating tragedy and its final curtain intervening.

The sea had grown rougher as we talked, the continuing gale piling up waves in deep furrows that caused the yacht to lurch drunkenly. The sky, too, had increased in blackness, heavy clouds piling up from windward, while off on the horizon a strange copper sheen was visible, shading off in drab yellow. Captain Schmidt doubtless would have made his preparations for the impending storm long before we awakened to a realization of its nearness, but we did bestir ourselves in time to save the main spars. The men were still reefing in, however, when the blow fell, starting in a weird staccato rumble of thunder like a burst from the Voodoo drums in Nuflo's *boumfort* when his thunderstones had brought an answer from the sky.

There was something terrifying even in the natural menace the sound implied, and to De Gooch it seemed to be maddening. He started violently, and his eyes rolled wild like those of negroes in ritualistic ecstasy. Then the storm struck us in the full swoop of its power, and I heard his voice in a hoarse scream as a wedge of flying tackle carried him over the side. A towering wave followed the wind's destruction across the deck, and I found myself swept off my feet and suffocated by crushing weights of water. The world reeled drunkenly, driving from my mind all impressions but that of the Frenchman being hurled over the side tangled in the mass of tackle—a fate to which the wave was hurrying me also. Then I brought up with stunning impact against timbers, finding myself when the wave receded jammed in between the sternpost and rudder.

As freakishly as it had come the storm abated, and although I still clung to the supports in fear of being carried away, we were not again boarded by so heavy a sea. The wind fell off, after the first

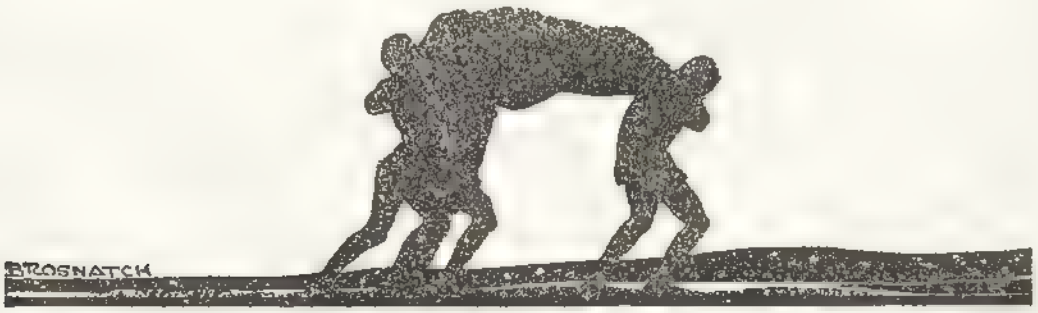
sweep of its fury, and although the vessel still wallowed heavily in the trough, I ventured to relinquish my hold and make my way along the deck. The havoc had been terrific, the main spars by a miracle having been left, but everything else had been wrenched away, leaving a clear-swept scene of desolation. But the thought that struck me most heavily of all was that I was alone on the ship, no human thing being visible except a figure dangling down from the starboard rail. Approaching it, I recognized the body of De Gooch, hanging by his neck from the tangled mass of tackle. His swollen face was a mottled purple, and the tongue protruded in a ghastly manner.

As I gazed in horror my attention was distracted by a sound from behind me, and I turned to see emerging from the companionway a dusky figure—a figure that I recognized as Nuflo. And behind him, shuffling clumsily with heads down, appeared the four men I had seen that morning being sewed into burial canvas, Captain Schmidt and the three sailors. I started forward, but Nuflo warned me away from them. Advancing past me to the rail he looked long at the figure dangling there, producing finally a machete with which he severed the ropes and let it fall into the sea. I thought of the sharks I had seen the previous evening, and did not look. When he turned to me his grim face was not without kindliness, expressing something even of his wonted affection toward me.

"Agoué has preserved you, my son," he said gravely, "and I welcome back the friend Agoué has given me. Your welcome is secure both in *caille* and *boumfort*—but come no more in company with the skeptic and despoiler. These things rot the soul."

After repairing the sails and tackle to the best of our ability we retraced the course we had followed from the islands, sighting land near evening on the next day. I spent the interval in a state of nervous and physical exhaustion, scarcely attending to the management of the ship, except to note that it was worked by the *zombies,* under the direction of Nuflo. *Zombies* I knew them to be, although he was silent before my questions, and would not suffer me to approach near to them.

I had recovered from my experience by the time we dropped anchor sufficiently to help drop the ship's boat into the sea, and man one of the oars. At the beech we parted, after having first shoved the boat off and watched it drift out to the open sea. We parted; Nuflo to make his way back to his own village; I to seek out the owner of a fishing-boat who would carry me to Port-au-Prince. With strange, mixed feelings I watched him disappear on his way, a form hard to identify with that of Nemesis. But on his back was De Gooch's knapsack.



The Disinterment of Venus

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A bizarre tale of the strange yearnings and carnal desires that beset a brotherhood of monks when the statue of a pagan goddess was dug up in the abbey garden

PRIOR to certain highly deplorable and scandalous events in the year 1550, the vegetable garden of Perigon was situated on the southeast side of the abbey. After these events, it was removed to the northwest side, where it has remained ever since; and the former garden-site was given to weeds and briars which, by strict order of the successive abbots, no one has ever tried to eradicate or curb.

The happenings which compelled this removal of the Benedictine's turnip and carrot patches became a popular tale in Averoigne. It is hard to say how much or how little of the legend is apocryphal.

One April morning, three monks were spading lustily in the garden. Their names were Paul, Pierre and Hughes. The first was a man of ripe years, hale and robust; the second was in his early prime; the third was little more than a boy, and had but recently taken his final vows.

Being moved with an especial ardor, in which the vernal stirring of youthful sap may have played its part, Hughes proceeded to dig the loamy soil even more diligently than his comrades. The ground was almost free of stones, owing to the careful tillage of many generations of monks; but anon, through the muscular zeal with which it was wielded, the spade of Hughes encountered a hard and well-buried object of indeterminate size.

Hughes felt that this obstruction, which in all likelihood was a small boulder, should be removed for the honor of the monastery and the glory of God. Bending busily, he shoveled away the moist, blackish loam in an effort to uncover it. The task was more arduous than he had expected; and the supposed boulder began to reveal an amazing length and a quite singular formation as he bared it by degrees. Leaving their own toil, Pierre and Paul came to his assistance. Soon, through the zealous endeavors of the three, the nature of the buried object became all too manifest.

In the large pit they had now dug, the monks beheld the grimy head and torso of what was plainly a marble woman or goddess from antique years. The pale stone of shoulders and arms, tinged faintly as if with a living rose, had been scraped clean in places by their shovels; but the face and breasts were still black with heavily caked loam.

The figure stood erect, as if on a hidden pedestal. One arm was raised, caressing with a shapely hand the ripe contour of shoulder and bosom; the other, hanging idly, was still plunged in the earth. Digging deeplier, the monks uncovered the full hips and rounded thighs; and finally, taking turns in the pit, whose rim was now higher than their heads, they came to the sunken pedestal, which stood on a pavement of granite.

During the course of their excavations, the Brothers had felt a strange, powerful excitement whose cause they could hardly have explained, but which seemed to

arise, like some obscure contagion, from the long-buried arms and bosom of the image. Mingled with a pious horror due to the infamous paganry and nudity of the statue, there was an unacknowledged pleasure which the three would have rebuked in themselves as vile and shameful if they had recognized it.

Fearful of chipping or scratching the marble, they wielded their spades with much chariness; and when the digging was completed and the comely feet were uncovered on their pedestal, Paul, the oldest, standing beside the image in the pit, began to wipe away with a handful of weeds and grass the maculations of dark loam that still clung to its lovely body. This task he performed with great thoroughness; and he ended by polishing the marble with the hem and sleeves of his black robe.

He and his fellows, who were not without classic learning, now saw that the figure was evidently a statue of Venus, dating no doubt from the Roman occupation of Averoigne, when certain altars to this divinity had been established by the invaders.

The vicissitudes of half-legendary time, the long dark years of inhumation, had harmed the Venus little if at all. The slight mutilation of an ear-tip half hidden by rippling curls, and the partial fracture of a shapely middle toe, merely served to add, if possible, a keener seduction to her languorous beauty.

She was exquisite as the succubi of youthful dreams, but her perfection was touched with inenarrable evil. The lines of the mature figure were fraught with a maddening luxuriousness; the lips of the full, Circean face were half pouting, half smiling with ambiguous allure. It was the masterpiece of an unknown, decadent sculptor; not the noble maternal Venus of heroic times, but the sly and cruelly voluptuous Cytherean of dark orgies, ready for her descent into the Hollow Hill.

A forbidden enchantment, an unhallowed thralldom, seemed to flow from the flesh-pale marble and to weave itself like invisible hair about the hearts of the Brothers. With a sudden, mutual feeling of shame, they recalled their monkhood, and began to debate what should be done with the Venus, which, in a monastery garden, was somewhat misplaced. After brief discussion, Hughes went to report their find to the abbot and await his decision regarding its disposal. In the meanwhile, Paul and Pierre resumed with their garden labors, stealing, perhaps, occasional covert glances at the pagan goddess.

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AUGUSTIN the abbot came presently into the garden, accompanied by those monks who were not, at that hour, engaged in some special task. With a severe mien, in silence, he proceeded to inspect the statue; and those with him waited reverently, not venturing to speak before their abbot had spoken.

Even the saintly Augustin, however, in spite of his age and rigorous temper, was somewhat discomfited by the peculiar witchery which seemed to emanate from the marble. Of this he gave no sign, and the natural austerity of his demeanor deepened. Curtly he ordered the bringing of ropes, and directed the raising of the Venus from her loamy bed to a standing position on the garden ground beside the hole. In this task, Paul, Pierre and Hughes were assisted by two others.

Many of the monks now pressed forward to examine the figure closely; and several were even prompted to touch it, till rebuked for this unseemly action by their superior. Certain of the elder and

more austere Benedictines urged its immediate destruction, arguing that the image was a heathen abomination that defiled the abbey garden by its presence. Others, the most practical, pointed out that the Venus, being a rare and beautiful example of Roman sculpture, might well be sold at a goodly price to some rich and impious art-lover.

Augustin, though he felt that the Venus should be destroyed as an impure pagan idol, was filled with a queer and peculiar hesitation which led him to defer the necessary orders for her demolishment. It was as if the subtly wanton loveliness of the marble were pleading for clemency like a living form, with a voice half human, half divine. Averting his eyes from the white bosom, he spoke harshly, bidding the Brothers to return to their labors and devotions, and saying that the Venus could remain in the garden till arrangements were made for her ultimate disposition and removal. Pending this, he instructed one of the Brothers to bring sackcloth and drape therewith the unseemly nudity of the goddess.

The disinterment of this antique image became a source of much discussion and some perturbation and dissension amid the quiet Brotherhood at Perigon. Because of the curiosity shown by many monks, the abbot issued an injunction that no one should approach the statue, other than those whose labors might compel an involuntary proximity. He himself, at that time, was criticized by some of the deans for his laxness in not destroying the Venus immediately. During the few years that remained to him, he was to regret bitterly the remissness he had shown in this matter.

No one, however, dreamt of the grave scandals that were to ensue shortly. But, on the day following the discovery of the statue, it became manifest that some evil and disturbing influence was abroad. Heretofore, breaches of discipline had been rare among the Brothers; and cardinal offenses were quite unknown; but now it seemed that a spirit of unruliness, impiety, ribaldry and wrong-doing had entered Perigon.

Paul, Pierre and Hughes were the first to undergo penance for their peccancies. A shocked dean had overheard them discussing with impure levity, certain matters that were more suitable for the conversation of worldly gallants than of monks. By way of extenuation, the three Brothers pleaded that they had been obsessed with carnal thoughts and images ever since their exhumation of the Venus; and for this they blamed the statue, saying that a pagan witchcraft had come upon them from its flesh-white marble.

On that same day, others of the monks were charged with similar offenses; and still others made confession of lubric desires and visions such as had tormented Anthony during his desert vigil. Those, too, were prone to blame the Venus. Before evensong, many infractions of monastic rule were reported; and some of them were of such nature as to call for the severest rebuke and penance. Brothers whose conduct had heretofore been exemplary in all ways were found guilty of transgressions such as could be accounted for only by the direct influence of Satan or some powerful demon.

Worst of all, on that very night, it was found that Hughes and Paul were absent from their beds in the dormitory; and no one could say whither they had gone. They did not return on the day following. Inquiries were made by the abbot's order in the neighboring village of Sainte Zenobie, and it was learned that Paul and Hughes had spent the night at a tavern of unsavory repute, drinking and wenching; and they had taken the road

to Vyones, chief city of the province, at early dawn. Later, they were apprehended and brought back to the monastery, protesting that their downfall was wholly due to some evil contagion which they had incurred by touching the statue.

In view of the unexampled demoralization which prevailed at Perigon, no one doubted that a diabolic pagan charm was at work. The source of the charm was all too obvious. Moreover, queer tales were told by monks who had labored in the garden or had passed within sight of the image. They swore that the Venus was no mere sculptured idol but a living woman or she-devil who had changed her position repeatedly and had rearranged the folds of the sackcloth in such manner as to lay bare one shapely shoulder and a part of her bosom. Others avowed that the Venus walked in the garden by night; and some even affirmed that she had entered the monastery and appeared before them like a succubus.

Much fright and horror was created by these tales, and no one dared to approach the image closely. Though the situation was supremely scandalous, the abbot still forbore to issue orders for the statue's demolition, fearing that any monk who touched it, even with a motive so pious, would court the baleful sorcery that had brought Hughes and Paul to disaster and disgrace, and had led others into impurity of speech or actual impiety.

It was suggested, however, that some laymen should be hired to shatter the idol and remove and bury its fragments. This, no doubt, would have been accomplished in good time, if it had not been for the hasty and fanatic zeal of Brother Louis.

3

This Brother, a youth of good family, was conspicuous among the Benedictines both for his comely face and his austere piety. Handsome as Adonis, he was given to ascetic vigils and prolonged devotions, outdoing in this regard the abbot and the deans.

At the hour of the statue's disinterment, he was busily engaged in copying a Latin testament; and neither then nor at any later time had he cared to inspect a find which he considered more than dubious. He had expressed disapprobation on hearing from his fellows the details of the discovery; and feeling that the abbey garden was polluted by the presence of an obscene image, he had purposely avoided all windows through which the marble might have been visible to his chaste eyes.

When the influence of heathen evil and corruption became manifest amid the Brothers, he had shown great indignation, deeming it a most insufferable thing that virtuous, God-fearing monks should be brought to shame through the operation of some hellish pagan spell. He had reprobated openly the hesitation of Augustin and his delay in destroying the maleficent idol. More mischief, he said, would ensue if it were left intact.

In view of all this, extreme surprize and alarm were felt at Perigon when, on the fourth day after the exhumation of the statue, Brother Louis was discovered missing. His bed had not been occupied on the previous night; but it seemed impossible that he could have fled the monastery, yielding to such desires and impulsions as had caused the ruin of Paul and Hughes.

The monks were strictly interrogated by their abbot, and it was revealed that Brother Louis, when last seen, had been loitering about the abbey workshop. Since, formerly, he had shown small interest in tools or manual labor, this was deemed a peculiar thing. Forthwith a visit was made to the workshop; and the

monk in charge of the smithy soon found that one of his heaviest hammers had been removed.

The conclusion was obvious to all: Louis, impelled by virtuous ardor and holy wrath, had gone forth during the night to demolish the baleful image of Venus.

Augustin and the Brothers who were with him repaired immediately to the garden. There they were met by the gardeners, who, noticing from afar that the image no longer occupied its position beside the pit, were hurrying to report this matter to the abbot. They had not dared to investigate the mystery of its disappearance, believing firmly that the statue had come to life and was lurking somewhere about the garden.

Made bold by their number and by the leadership of Augustin, the assembled monks approached the pit. Beside its rim they beheld the missing hammer, lying on the clodded loam as if Louis had cast it aside. Near by was the sacking that had clothed the image; but there were no fragments of broken marble such as they had thought to see. The footprints of Louis were clearly imprinted upon the pit's margin, and were discernible in strangely close proximity to the mark left by the pedestal of the statue.

All this was very peculiar, and the monks felt that the mystery had begun to assume a more than sinister tinge. Then, peering into the hole itself, they beheld a thing that was explicable only through the machinations of Satan—or one of Satan's most pernicious and seductive she-demons.

Somehow, the Venus had been overturned and had fallen back into the broad deep pit. The body of Brother Louis, with a shattered skull and lips bruised to a sanguine pulp, was lying crushed beneath her marble breasts. His arms were clasped about her in a desperate, lover-like embrace, to which death had now added its own rigidity. Even more horrible and inexplicable, however, was the fact that the stone arms of the Venus had changed their posture and were now folded closely about the dead monk as if she had been sculptured in the attitude of an amorous enlacement!

The horror and consternation felt by the Benedictines were inexpressible. Some would have fled from the spot in panic, after viewing this frightful and most abominable prodigy; but Augustin restrained them, his features stern with the religious ire of one who beholds the fresh handiwork of the Adversary. He commanded the bringing of a cross, an aspergillus and holy water, together with a ladder for use in descending into the pit; saying that the body of Louis must be redeemed from the baleful and dolorous plight into which it had fallen. The iron hammer, lying beside the hole, was proof of the righteous intention with which Louis had gone forth; but it was all too plain that he had succumbed to the hellish charms of the statue. Nevertheless, the Church could not abandon its erring servant to the powers of Evil.

When the ladder was brought, Augustin himself led the descent, followed by three of the stoutest and most courageous Brothers, who were willing to risk their own spiritual safety for the redemption of Louis. Regarding that which ensued, the legends vary slightly. Some say that the aspersions of holy water, made by Augustin on the statue and its victim, were without palpable effect; while others relate that the drops turned to infernal steam when they struck the recumbent Venus, and blackened the flesh of Louis like that of a month-old cadaver, thus proving him wholly claimed by perdition. But the tales agree

in this, that the strength of the three stout Brothers, laboring in unison at their abbot's direction, was impotent to loosen the marble clasp of the goddess from about her prey.

So, by the order of Augustin, the pit was filled hastily to its rim with earth and stones; and the very spot where it had been, being left without mound or other mark, was quickly overgrown by grass and weeds along with the rest of the abandoned garden.

One Christmas Eve

By ELLIOT O'DONNELL

This strange tale was told to the author by a little boy who generally speaks the truth

"POOR Auntie May, I do feel sorry for her," said the little boy with the solemn eyes.

His sister nodded her head dismally. "So do I, Charlie, and I feel sorry for myself. Granny's temper is awful."

There was a long pause after this, and both children gazed thoughtfully into the fire.

"I would rather have stayed at school for Christmas," the boy murmured, kicking the heel of his left foot, "but for auntie and you. I—well, I detest granny—she is always scolding someone."

"If I were auntie, I would elope," the girl said. "I am sure Mr. Carson would do it."

The sound of footsteps echoed along the passage, and a sharp, high-pitched voice called out, "May, May, wherever are you? It's too bad of you to be idling away the morning doing nothing. Come and read the *Guardian* to your father, or alter this blouse for me. You know the dressmakers can never fit me."

"Oh, dear," sighed the little girl, "poor Auntie May. It's granny. I really can't stand her temper today of all days. She is sure to scold me for something."

So saying, the little girl gently stole to the door, placed her brown head against it for a moment, smiled assuringly in the direction of Charlie, and stole out.

The fire was warm, the weather intensely cold, and Charlie felt too comfortable to move far. So he simply crawled on all fours to the big screen near the fender, and curled himself up behind it. By and by he fell asleep.

He hadn't been dozing very long before voices awoke him. At first, in his dreamy state, he couldn't imagine who they were, but he soon recognized them as those of his Auntie May and her fiancé.

There was nothing Charlie hated so much as eavesdropping, and he would have been the first to denounce anyone else; yet he didn't like to call out, for fear they should think he had been listening, and he didn't know how long they had been talking. He tried to think of something else; he stopped his ears, but he couldn't help hearing some of their remarks.

"She really is beyond endurance," the young man was saying. "I never met a woman with such a temper."

Auntie May sighed. "I can't help it," she replied. "I know she is very trying. I have often thought I would leave home and earn my living."

The young man laughed ironically.

"Earn your living!" he said. "Good heaven! no other girl in England would do what you do for the paltry allowance you get, and with such an irritable stepmother to bully and hamper you every minute of the day. I feel as if"—here he kicked the hearth-rug fiercely—"as if I would like to——"

"Hush!" Auntie May whispered, placing her little hand over his mouth; "remember, after all, she is a sort of mother, and, I think, at the bottom she means well."

"I wish we had enough money to marry at once; don't you, darling?"

Auntie May's eyes beamed. "I do indeed! Oh, wouldn't it be delightful, Hugh!"

Just then a big flame illuminated the wall by their side and made them both look.

"Isn't she some ancestor of yours, darling?" the young man asked, gazing at the portrait of a lady with curly hair and gray-blue eyes. It was a very pretty face.

May nodded. "My great-aunt," she replied. "Poor thing, she had a sad history."

"What happened to her? She interests me because she is very like you, only not so pretty."

May smiled a little sadly.

"You only say that to please me," she said. "I'm not pretty now, I'm too old. Well, my great-aunt was engaged to be married to a poor man; her parents were very rich and they disapproved of the match. I imagine her mother's temper must have been a bit like my stepmother's, perhaps worse." Here Hugh grunted. "Anyhow she was sorely tried, and in the end eloped one Christmas Eve. At least so it was generally supposed, as she vanished, taking with her a diamond necklace of immense value. If we only had the money it is said to have cost, we could marry. The funny part is that her young man was seen in the village afterward, and was alleged to have made inquiries about her. What became of them both no one ever knew, and the parents would never allow her name to be mentioned."

"Rather strange about the young man," Hugh said, stirring the fire thoughtfully with the poker. "Do you think she really did elope?"

May shook her head. "I can't say," she replied, "her parents declared that the young man was a bad lot and wouldn't have him near the house. It was snowing when she was supposed to have left home, and no footmarks or any other traces of her were to be found. If she didn't join the young man, where could she have gone?"

"Perhaps she committed suicide; she was very unhappy, wasn't she?"

May shuddered. "How horrible!" she murmured; "and do you know she is said to haunt the house on Christmas Eve, though I can't say I have ever met anyone who has seen her."

Hugh caught hold of the little hand nearest to him and kissed it tenderly.

"Well, I wish I could see her, darling," he said, laughing. "Perhaps she might tell us a way out of our difficulty."

Just then a well-known voice was heard from the dining-room. "Now then! May, come! your father wants you to make his tea. I suppose you are only canoodling as usual. Do you hear me? Oh, what a thing it is to be old!"

"Oh, dear!" sighed May, as she tore herself away from the strong pair of

arms holding her down, "there is no peace for the weary."

Hugh gazed longingly after her.

"There goes an angel of a girl," he said aloud, "with a—well, a most unpleasant stepmother," and a subdued murmur from behind the screen re-echoed those sentiments.

2

AFTER they had gone, Charlie came out of his hiding-place.

The room was delightfully cozy, with its fire no longer throwing out yellow flames, but rich with crimson embers. Outside were knots of elms and oaks, erect and silent, with their branches covered with snow, and the moon peeked between them as much as to say, "You shan't shut me out; I am determined to see what Santa Claus is doing this Christmas."

Charlie loved the snow. He thought Churchdale was at its very best when the leaves and meadows glittered with their mantle of white.

But his heart was bitter within him as he thought of his grandmother's treatment of Auntie May, whom he loved passionately. He sat and gazed at the picture of her ancestress, and the longer he looked the more his imagination led him to believe the beautiful eyes smiled into his.

He heard a door open and a shrill voice cry out, "Charlie! come down to tea at once. We can't keep the things on the table for ever!" Then Auntie May as usual caught it. And his grandfather's voice joined in with quotations from the *Guardian,* to which they all had to listen, although it bored them very much.

Then his granny came out and stood at the foot of the stairs and called louder than before.

But Charlie felt very rebellious and he did not go. He wanted to annoy her as a punishment for her behavior to Auntie May, and he also couldn't remove his eyes from the picture.

Then he heard Mr. Carson suggest in a mild voice that Charlie must have gone out to tea at the vicarage.

After that there was a lull in the angry storm, and the old people's voices subsided into calmer and more rational tones.

The room grew darker, for Charlie didn't put any more coal on the fire, and the shadows from without filed in through the bay windows in rapid succession.

"You are pretty," Charlie sighed, as he looked at the clear eyes. "I am sorry for you if you had a mother with such a temper as granny. She is enough—well, enough to make me almost hate her; she is such a beast to Auntie May, always scolding. Yes, picture, I am awfully sorry for you. I heard this afternoon, you know, what a rough time you had. You have lovely eyes—just my favorite color. How I should get ragged if the boys at school heard me talk like this! They don't care for reading, as I do. I think most of them will be doctors or lawyers, or some such things, but I couldn't stand anything like that. I shall be a poet or an author, and make a name that will go down to—I don't know what people call it—but I shall be in the papers and *Idler* and tip-top magazines like that. But I won't love anyone as I do you. Do you hear me, picture? You are my first love! Granny says, 'Love at first sight is all rubbish!' She told auntie so, but she doesn't know everything, although she thinks she does.

"Oh, I wish you would help Auntie May! It is Christmas Eve, and they say you haunt the place tonight. I shouldn't be afraid if I saw you. Won't you come and talk to me? I would like to ask you to kiss me, you have such pretty lips, only

it sounds a bit soft; and then a ghost couldn't touch one—at least, one can't touch a ghost."

It grew darker and darker, and the fire flickered out its farewell in a tiny yellow flame that shot up its fork-like head and licked the face on the wall.

Charlie gave a little jump—the eyes were most certainly smiling at him now, and — why — good heavens! the hand moved.

He bounded to his feet; the picture was holding out its hands to him to help it down.

He didn't feel the least bit afraid, but took the outstretched hands in his own. They were so cold that they sent a chill right through him. The lady shook her curls from her forehead, and leaped lightly to the ground.

She didn't speak, so Charlie held his tongue. He felt horribly shy, too, for the lady looked lovely; he was struck with admiration for the Empire gown she was wearing.

Putting one finger on her lips to enjoin silence, she glided to the conservatory door, and Charlie, who remembered the duties of a gentleman, hurried to open it for her. To his surprize, she passed right through it, and was waiting for him on the other side.

She smiled assuringly at him, and his momentary fear departed. He followed gladly after her, and though he had neither overcoat, hat, nor boots, he was unconscious of the cold.

She passed through the conservatory as if she was familiar with every inch of it, and then out onto the lawn, where the snow lay thick.

He kept close to her heels, and she led him down the avenue, dark, save for the few patches of light made by the moon.

Finally she struck off to the right, down a path he seldom visited, and came to a halt in a tiny siding. Before her lay a dark hole overgrown with bushes and brambles. She pointed to it, and Charlie saw great tears in her eyes, while her lips moved as if she was talking to him. He knew she was in trouble, and a wave of love and pity swept through him. He sprang forward, forgetting the death-trap before him. But she anticipated his movement, and he felt for the second time cold hands stretched out to save him.

"Oh, kiss me!" he whispered, "just one—for you are too lovely for anything."

It seemed to him then that something icy cold fell on his cheeks, just like the salt spray of the sea, and the next moment he was in her arms. A wild paroxysm of happiness surged through him—a joy so intense and restful that the feeling of it came back to him again and again in the gray days of his manhood.

A drowsiness crept over him, and though he struggled hard to keep awake to see her face, it was without avail—he sank swiftly to sleep.

When he awoke someone was bending over him. It was Auntie May, and he was lying on the hearth-rug beneath the picture.

3

"I WONDER if there is anything in it," Auntie May asked herself, as Charlie finished his tale. "I'm afraid it was only a very pretty dream, dear," she added, aloud. "See! there is the picture in its old place."

Charlie raised his eyes. Yes, what auntie said was true. There it was, and he saw with a pang that the eyes did not recognize him.

He felt his shoes. "They are wet, auntie," he cried. "Yes! they are, indeed," and so they were.

In the morning, Charlie took May and

Hugh down the avenue. He was wild with excitement, and even Hugh was obliged to own that it looked promising. At last they came to the path, then to the siding, and then, with a shout of triumph, to the dark hole.

"By Jove!" Hugh exclaimed, "the kid is right. I don't believe it was a dream, but the ghost after all. I will get down here."

Auntie May begged him to be careful, but Hugh was a Celt, and very superstitious.

So a rope was fetched, without the granny's leave, and Hugh was lowered into the well. It seemed an eternity to all before he reappeared, but when he did so, they were rewarded for their patience.

At the bottom of the well, which was dry, lay a skeleton, still clutching in its hand a jewel-case. The latter contained a diamond necklace.

"That is it!" Charlie cried, the moment he saw it. "That is the one the picture was wearing!"

And what little doubt they had on the point was set at rest, when the medical authority pronounced it to be the skeleton of a woman.

So they found a clue at last to that mystery of the Christmas Eve of long ago. The poor lady had missed her way in the snowstorm and had fallen down the well. She was laid to rest in the churchyard, and her spirit has never been seen again, though Charlie had implored it to come just for one minute.

Even the cross grandmother became in a better humor when she saw the jewels, and yielded, with a good grace, to the unanimous desire that it should be given to Auntie May.

It was, and with the money it fetched, a substantial wedding dower was provided for the young bride.

Drowned Argosies

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

A weird tale of the sea

THE *Volcania* had gone down. This much Charteris knew. It was all he felt he could possibly lay claim to knowing. Drifting five days in an open boat in the Carribbean Sea is not conducive to sanity.

Not that Charteris was going mad. Far from it. But he couldn't understand the ghastly people who seemed to be trying to talk to him.

They were sailormen. He knew it. But what a peculiar crew! There were half-naked galley slaves with the great calluses still on their palms. There were old shellbacks, barefoot, and naked above the waist. There were men who had driven the great clipper ships from Canton to London in sixty days. And there were men like Charteris, who knew the intricacies of the great liners' guts.

They were trying to talk to him—then Charteris shook his head.

"Dead men can't talk!"

The sun beat down. The brazen sea re-

flected it. Water — *water* — WATER! That was Charteris' sole thought.

Finally one old shellback, whose gaunt figure betokened great strength and greater endurance, beckoned him, and Charteris heard: "I say, maty—don't worry. Who do you want to sign on with?"

"What do you mean?" asked Charteris. "You can't——"

The old shellback laughed, and Charteris shuddered. It is odd to hear ghosts laugh, and Charteris knew these were ghosts. Where else could men have come from in all that dying sea?

"Think we're dead, don't you?" said the shellback. "Well, we ain't! Only time a sailor dies is when they plant him six feet under in a churchyard. There's men here who served in every kind of craft, from a bireme to a liner."

"Who are you?" asked Charteris.

"Me? Why, bless you, I sailed with Paul Jones on the *Ranger*. A good cap'n, that, only a bit of a driver."

"*Paul Jones?* Why, man, he's dead nearly two hundred years!"

"Not quite that," said the old shellback, and laughed.

"Ugh!" thought Charteris, "I *must* be going mad."

"Not quite that," said the old shellback again. "Now you take Petrus here"—and he waved a hand toward a squat hairy half-naked man—"he sailed with Quintus Maximus when they stripped the Mediterranean of the Carthaginian boats."

Petrus grinned and gabbled something. The old shellback translated. "He says it was a hell of a good fight, and you should have seen 'em scatter when the biremes came."

"What? Served under Quintus Maximus? Why, man, that's nineteen hundred years ago!"

"Nigher two thousand — but what's time, what's time?"

And he spat.

That, thought Charteris, was the ragged limit. He must be mad.

There was silence once more until Charteris leaned his head against a thwart and began to cry, in long, racking sobs. The shellback reached over, and Charteris shivered at the touch of his hand. It was icy cold, in spite of the brazen sun still sending its red-hot rays to beat on Charteris' back.

"I felt that way when they left me to drift, too. You know, I was the man they lost from the *Ranger*. But hell—here's Hendrik Hudson. Want to talk to *him* about driftin'?"

"No," said Charteris, "no—no—no—no—no—no—no——"

A voice broke in, a deep voice vibrant with sympathy.

"Poor youngster! They all feel that way just before they sign on. Myself, I felt it too."

"Who are you?" Charteris asked wildly.

"Hendrik Hudson, cap'n of the *Half-Moon*."

"What are you doing here?"

"I signed on to sail under Admiral Beresford. I command the *Saturnia*. Do you want to sign on with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Young fool! Do you not know that we who sailed the seven seas still sail beneath her bosom? Look!"—and he stabbed a thick fat finger at the green waves.

Weakly Charteris crawled to the gunwale and looked. Down below he saw a tall clipper ship sailing serenely. Her sails were gone, and in their places were long streamers of kelp. From truck to keelson she was wreathed with flying seaweed, but about her decks moved sailormen going to and fro quite as if it were their normal life. Muffled by sixty fathoms of water, he heard the strokes of a

ship's bell and a dim voice: *"Three bells! Relieve the wheel and lookout."*

"But I know nothing about sailing-ships, Cap'n. I'm an engineer."

"So? Nat!" And Hendrik Hudson turned to the old shellback. "Does Cap'n Lucks need an engineer?"

"Depends, Cap'n. I hear he needed a man with an extra first's certificate."

"Call him up, will you?"

And Charteris' eyes bulged as he saw the sailor, Nat, produce a bosun's whistle and blow an odd piping call.

The sea boiled, and up rose a man dressed even as Charteris' old captain. The four gold stripes of a master mariner shone as they had in the days when Captain Lucks had proudly trod the deck of the *Titania*.

"Hello. What's up?" he boomed.

And Charteris noticed that there was a slight hiss to the S's, as though the captain had false teeth.

"This man, Cap'n," said Nat, respectfully pulling his forelock, "is gonna sign on with you."

"Hmm. What can he do?"

"I'm an extra first, sir," said Charteris, convinced by now that all this was more than just a dream, that it was indeed actually life.

DIMLY on the horizon rose a faint smudge of smoke as a long, lean coast-guard cutter drove its knife-like prow through the waters, searching for survivors of the *Volcania*. On the bridge a tense officer quartered the sea with terrible efficiency.

"God!" he thought. "To be left adrift here! Bos'n!"

His voice was sharp. He had picked up the white speck that was Charteris' boat.

"A quarter west! Call the cap'n. I see a boat!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The wheel spun. A messenger raced aft to get the captain.

The captain took his position on the bridge and whistled down the speaking-tube.

"Engine room," he said, "bridge speaking. Can you get a couple more knots outta this hooker?"

The funnels belched black smoke. The destroyer's frame quivered as her mighty engines thrust her forward with renewed speed.

She stood by Charteris' floating prison. A boat was lowered and able seamen lifted Charteris, trying weakly to salute someone they could not see, to its security.

"I'll be honored to sign on, sir," mumbled Charteris vaguely.

They had seen men adrift in open boats before. They knew what the sea and sun can do. So they looked at him sympathetically and went about the business of transferring him to the cutter.

Tenderly the hard seamen carried him below, still talking of things they did not understand, of drowned ships, and that ghastly whistle on the *Saturnia*.

Charteris gazed wildly about him. He seemed to be trying to place his surroundings. "My new quarters, Cap'n?" he asked hoarsely.

"Take it easy, son—you're all shipshape now," advised a grizzled bosun's mate.

Charteris looked at the speaker without comprehension. Suddenly he fell back and began to babble unintelligibly.

The old bosun's mate pursed his lips and spat thoughtfully. Then he bent forward.

His eyes widened. Swiftly he straightened and crossed himself reverently.

"Cripes!" said he in amazement; "how'd *this* guy know Lucks—*and know he had false teeth?*"

The Dead Man's Tale*

By WILLARD E. HAWKINS

THE curious narrative that follows was found among the papers of the late Doctor John Pedric, psychical investigator and author of occult works. It bears evidence of having been received through automatic writing, as were several of his publications. Unfortunately, there are no records to confirm this assumption, and none of the mediums or assistants employed by him in his research work admits knowledge of it. Possibly—for the doctor was reputed to possess some psychic powers—it may have been received by him. At any rate, the lack of data renders the recital useless as a document for the Society for Psychical Research. It is published for whatever intrinsic interest or significance it may possess. With reference to the names mentioned, it may be added that they are not confirmed by the records of the War Department. It could be maintained, however, that purposely fictitious names were substituted, either by the doctor or the communicating entity.

THEY called me—when I walked the earth in a body of dense matter—Richard Devaney. Though my story has little to do with the war, I was killed in the second battle of the Marne, on July 24, 1918.

Many times, as men were wont to do who felt the daily, hourly imminence of death in the trenches, I had pictured that event in my mind and wondered what it would be like. Mainly I had inclined toward a belief in total extinction. That, when the vigorous, full-blooded body I possessed should lie bereft of its faculties, I, as a creature apart from it, should go on, was beyond credence. The play of life through the human machine, I reasoned, was like the flow of gasoline into the motor of an automobile. Shut off that flow, and the motor became inert, dead, while the fluid which had given it power was in itself nothing.

And so, I confess, it was a surprize to discover that I was dead and yet not dead.

I did not make the discovery at once. There had been a blinding concussion, a moment of darkness, a sensation of falling—falling—into a deep abyss. An indefinite time afterward, I found myself standing dazedly on the hillside, toward the crest of which we had been pressing against the enemy. The thought came that I must have momentarily lost con-

* From WEIRD TALES for March, 1923.

sciousness. Yet now I felt strangely free from physical discomfort.

What had I been doing when that moment of blackness blotted everything out? I had been dominated by a purpose, a flaming desire——

Like a flash, recollection burst upon me, and with it a blaze of hatred—not toward the German gunners, ensconced in the woods above us, but toward the private enemy I had been about to kill.

It had been the opportunity for which I had waited interminable days and nights. In the open formation, he kept a few paces ahead of me. As we alternately ran forward, then dropped on our bellies and fired, I had watched my chance. No one would suspect, with the dozens who were falling every moment under the merciless fire from the trees beyond, that the bullet which ended Louis Winston's career came from a comrade's rifle.

Twice I had taken aim, but withheld my fire—not from indecision, but lest, in my vengeful heat, I might fail to reach a vital spot. When I raised my rifle the third time, he offered a fair target.

God! how I hated him! With fingers itching to speed the steel toward his heart, I forced myself to remain calm, to hold fire for that fragment of a second that would insure careful aim.

Then, as the pressure of my finger tightened against the trigger, came the blinding flash—the moment of blackness.

2

I HAD evidently remained unconscious longer than I realized. Save for a few figures that lay motionless or squirming in agony on the field, the regiment had passed on, to be lost in the trees at the crest of the hill. With a pang of disappointment, I realized that Louis would be among them.

Involuntarily I started onward, driven still by that impulse of burning hatred, when I heard my name called.

Turning in surprize, I saw a helmeted figure crouching beside something huddled in the tall grass. No second glance was needed to tell me that the huddled something was the body of a soldier. I had eyes only for the man who was bending over him. Fate had been kind to me. It was Louis.

Apparently, in his preoccupation, he had not noticed me. Coolly I raised my rifle and fired.

The result was startling. Louis neither dropped headlong nor looked up at the report. Vaguely I questioned whether there had been a report.

Thwarted, I felt the lust to kill mounting in me with redoubled fury. With rifle upraised, I ran toward him. A terrific swing, and I crashed the stock against his head.

It passed clear through! Louis remained unmoved.

Uncomprehending, snarling, I flung the useless weapon away and fell upon him with bare hands—with fingers that strained to rend and tear and strangle.

Instead of encountering solid flesh and bone, they too passed through him.

Was it a mirage? A dream? Had I gone crazy? Sobered, for a moment forgetful of my fury, I drew back and tried to reduce the thing to reason. Was Louis but a figment of the imagination—a phantom?

My glance fell upon the figure beside which he was sobbing incoherent words of entreaty. I gave a start, then looked more closely. The dead man—for there was no question about his condition, with a bloody shrapnel wound in the side of his head—*was myself!*

Gradually the import of this penetrated my consciousness. Then I realized that it was Louis who had called my name—

that even now he was sobbing it over and over.

The irony of it struck me at the moment of realization. I was dead—*I* was the phantom — who had meant to kill Louis!

I looked at my hands, my uniform—I touched my body. Apparently I was as substantial as before the shrapnel buried itself in my head. Yet, when I had tried to grasp Louis, my hand seemed to encompass only space.

Louis lived, and I was dead!

The discovery for a time benumbed my feeling toward him. With impersonal curiosity, I saw him close the eyes of the dead man—the man who, somehow or other, had been myself. I saw him search the pockets and drew forth a letter I had written only that morning, a letter addressed to——

With a sudden surge of dismay, I darted forward to snatch it from his hands. He should not read that letter!

Again I was reminded of my impalpability.

But Louis did not open the envelope, although it was unsealed. He read the superscription, kissed it, as sobs rent his frame, and thrust the letter inside his khaki jacket.

"Dick! Buddy!" he cried brokenly. "How can I take this news back to her?"

My lips curled. Louis had no suspicion of the hate I bore him—had borne him ever since I discovered in him a rival for Velma Roth.

Oh, I had been clever! It was our "unselfish friendship" that endeared us both to her. A sign of jealousy, of ill nature, and I would have forfeited the paradise of her regard that apparently I shared with Louis.

I had never felt secure of my place in that paradise. True, I could always awaken a response in her, but I must put forth effort in order to do so. He held her interest, it seemed, without trying. They were happy with each other and in each other.

Our relations might be expressed by likening her to the water of a placid pool, Louis to the basin that held her, me to the wind that swept over it. By exerting myself, I could agitate the surface of her nature into ripples of pleasurable excitement—could even lash her emotions into a tempest. She responded to the stimulation of my mood, yet, in my absence, settled contentedly into the peaceful comfort of Louis' stedfast love.

I felt vaguely then—and am certain now, with a broader perspective toward realities—that Velma intuitively recognized Louis as her mate, yet feared to yield herself to him because of my sway over her emotional nature.

When the great war came, we all, I am convinced, felt that it would absolve Velma from the task of choosing between us.

Whether the agony that spoke from the violet depths of her eyes when we said good-bye was chiefly for Louis or for me, I could not tell. I doubt if she could have done so. But in my mind was the determination that only one of us should return, and—Louis would not be that one.

Did I feel no repugnance at thought of murdering the man who stood in my way? Very little. I was a savage at heart—a savage in whom desire outweighed anything that might stand in the way of gaining its object. From my point of view, I would have been a fool to pass the opportunity.

Why I should have so hated him, a mere obstacle in my path, I do not know. It may have been due to a prescience of the intangible barrier his blood would

always raise between Velma and me—or to a slumbering sense of remorse.

But, speculation aside, here I was, in a state of being that the world calls death, while Louis lived — was free to return home — to claim Velma — to flaunt his possession of all that I held precious.

It was maddening! Must I stand idly by, helpless to prevent this?

3

I HAVE wondered, since, how I could remain so long in touch with the objective world—why I did not at once, or very soon, find myself shut off from earthly sights and sounds as those in physical form are shut off from the things beyond.

The matter seems to have been determined by my will. Like weights of lead, envy of Louis and passionate longing for Velma held my feet to the sphere of dense matter.

Vengeful, despairing, I watched beside Louis. When at last he turned away from my body and, with tears streaming from his eyes, began to drag a useless leg toward the trenches we had left, I realized why he had not gone on with the others to the crest of the hill. He, too, was a victim of Boche gunnery.

I walked beside the stretcher-bearers when they had picked him up and were conveying him toward the base hospital. Throughout the weeks that followed I hovered near his cot, watching the doctors as they bound up the lacerated tendons in his thigh, and missing no detail of his battle with the fever.

Over his shoulder I read the first letter he wrote home to Velma, in which he gave a belated account of my death, dwelling upon the glory of my sacrifice:

"I have often thought that you two were meant for each other" [he wrote] *"and that if it had not been for fear of hurting me, you would have been his wife long ago. He was the best buddy a man ever had. If only I could have been the one to die!"*

Had I known it, I could have followed this letter across seas—could, in fact, have passed it and, by an exercise of the will, have been at Velma's side in the twinkling of an eye. But my ignorance of the laws of the new plane was total. All my thoughts were centered upon a problem of entirely different character.

Never was hold upon earthly treasure more reluctantly relinquished than was my hope of possessing Velma. Surely, death could not erect so absolute a barrier. There must be a way—some loophole of communication—some chance for a disembodied man to contend with his corporeal rival for a woman's love.

Slowly, very slowly, dawned the light of a plan. So feeble was the glimmer that it would scarcely have comforted one in less desperate straits, but to me it appeared to offer a possible hope. I set about methodically, with infinite patience, evolving it into something tangible, even though I had but the most indefinite idea of what the outcome might be.

The first suggestion came when Louis had so far recovered that but little trace of the fever remained. One afternoon, as he lay sleeping, the mail-distributer handed a letter to the nurse who happened to be standing beside his cot. She glanced at it, then tucked it under his pillow.

The letter was from Velma, and I was hungry for the contents. I did not then know that I could have read it easily, sealed though it was. In a frenzy of impatience, I exclaimed:

"Wake up, confound it, and read your letter!"

With a start, he opened his eyes. He looked around with a bewildered expression.

"Under your pillow!" I fumed. "Look under your pillow!"

In a dazed manner, he put his hand under the pillow and drew forth the letter.

A few hours later, I heard him commenting on the experience to the nurse.

"Something seemed to wake me up," he said, "and I had a peculiar impulse to feel under the pillow. It was just as if I knew I would find the letter there."

The circumstance seemed as remarkable to me as it did to him. It might be coincidence, but I determined to make a further test.

A series of experiments convinced me that I could, to a very slight degree, impress my thoughts and will upon Louis, especially when he was tired or on the borderland of sleep. Occasionally I was able to control the direction of his thoughts as he wrote home to Velma.

On one occasion, he was describing for her a funny little Frenchwoman who visited the hospital with a basket that always was filled with cigarettes and candy.

"Last time" [he wrote] *"she brought with her a boy whom she called——"*

He paused, with pencil upraised, trying to recall the name.

A moment later, he looked down at the page and stared with astonishment. The words, *"She called him Maurice,"* had been added below the unfinished line.

"I must be going daffy," he muttered. "I'd swear I didn't write that."

Behind him, I stood rubbing my hands in triumph. It was my first successful effort to guide the pencil while his thoughts strayed elsewhere.

Another time, he wrote to Velma:

"I've a strange feeling, lately, that dear old Dick is near. Sometimes, as I wake up, I seem to remember vaguely having seen him in my dreams. It's as if his features were just fading from view."

He paused here so long that I made another attempt to take advantage of his abstraction.

By an effort of the will that is difficult to explain, I guided his hand into the formation of the words:

"With a jugful of kisses for Winkie, as ever her——"

Just then, Louis looked down.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, as if he had seen a ghost.

4

"WINKIE" was a pet name I had given Velma when we were children together.

Louis always maintained there was no sense in it, and refused to adopt it, though I frequently called her by that name in later years. And of his own volition, Louis would never have mentioned anything so convivial as a jugful of kisses.

So, through the weary months before he was invalided home, I worked. When he left France at the debarkation point, he still walked on crutches, but with the promise of regaining the unassisted use of his leg before very long. Throughout the voyage, I hovered near him, sharing his impatience, his longing for the one we both held dearest.

Over the exquisite pain of the reunion —at which I was present, yet *not* present —I shall pass briefly. More beautiful than ever, more appealing with her vivid, deep coloring, Velma in the flesh was a vision that stirred my longing into an intense flame.

Louis limped painfully down the gangplank. When they met, she rested her head silently on his shoulder for a moment, then — her eyes brimming with tears—assisted him, with the tender solicitude of a mother, to the machine she had in waiting.

Two months later they were married. I felt the pain of this less deeply than I

would have done had it not been essential to my designs.

Whatever vague hope I may have had, however, of vicariously enjoying the delights of love were disappointed. I could not have explained why — I only knew that something barred me from intruding upon the sacred intimacies of their life, as if a defensive wall were interposed. It was baffling, but a very present fact, against which I found it useless to rebel. I have since learned—but no matter. . . . This had no bearing on my purpose, which hinged upon the ability I was acquiring of influencing Louis' thoughts and actions, of taking partial control of his faculties.

The occupation into which he drifted, restricted in choice as he was by the stiffened leg, helped me materially. Often, after an interminable shift at the bank, he would plod home at night with brain so weary and benumbed that it was a simple matter to impress my will upon him. Each successful attempt, too, made the next one easier.

The inevitable consequence was that in time Velma should notice his aberrations and betray concern.

"Why did you say to me, when you came in last night, 'There's a blue billy-goat on the stairs—I wish they'd drive him out'?" she demanded one morning.

He looked down shamefacedly at the tablecloth.

"I don't know what made me say it. I seemed to *want* to say it, and that was the only way to get it off my mind. I thought you'd take it as a joke." He shifted his shoulders, as if trying to dislodge an unpleasant burden.

"And was that what made you wear a necktie to bed?" she asked, ironically.

He nodded an affirmative. "I knew it was idiotic, but the idea kept running in my mind. It seemed as if the only way I could go to sleep was to give in to it. I don't have these freaks unless I'm very tired."

She said nothing more at the time, but that evening she broached the subject of his looking for an opening in some less sedentary occupation—a subject to which she thereafter constantly recurred.

Then came a development that surprized and excited me with its possibilities. Exhausted, drained to the last drop of his nerve-force, Louis was returning late one night from the bank, following the usual month-end overtime grind. As he walked from the car-line, I hovered over him, subduing his personality, forcing it under control, with the effort of will I had gradually learned to direct upon him. The process can only be explained in a crude way: It was as if I contended with him, sometimes successfully, for possession of the steering-wheel of the human car that he drove.

Velma was waiting when we arrived. As Louis' feet sounded on the threshold of their apartment, she opened the door, caught his hands, and drew him inside.

At the action, I felt inexplicably thrilled. It was as if some marvelous change had come over him. And then, as I met her gaze, I knew what that change was.

I held her hands in real flesh-and-blood contact. I was looking at her with Louis' sight!

5

THE shock of it cost me what I had gained. Shaken from my poise, I felt the personality I had subdued regain its sway.

The next moment, Louis was staring at Velma in bewilderment. Her eyes were filled with alarm.

"You — you *frightened* me!" she gasped, withdrawing her hands, which I

had all but crushed. "Louis, dear—don't *ever* look at me again like that!"

I can imagine the devouring intensity of gaze that had blazed forth from the features in that brief moment when they were mine.

From this time, my plans quickly took form. Two modes of action presented themselves. The first and more alluring, however, I was forced to abandon. It was none other than the wild dream of acquiring exclusive possession of Louis' body — of forcing him down, out, and into the secondary place I had occupied.

Despite the progress I had made, this proved inexpressibly difficult. For one thing, there seemed an affinity between Louis' body and his personality, which forced me out when he was moderately rested. This bond I might have weakened, but there were other factors.

One was the growing conviction on his part that something was radically wrong. With a faculty I had discovered of putting myself *en rapport* with him and reading his thoughts, I knew that at times he feared that he was going insane.

I once had the experience of accompanying him to an alienist and there, like the proverbial fly on the wall, overhearing learned scientific names applied to my efforts. The alienist spoke of "dual personality," "amnesia," and "the subconscious mind," while I laughed in my (shall I say?) ghostly sleeve.

But he advised Louis to seek a complete rest and, if possible, to go into the country to build up physically—which was what I desired most to prevent. I could not play the Mr. Hyde to his Dr. Jekyll if Louis maintained his normal virility.

Velma's fears, too, I knew were growing more acute. As insistently as she could, without betraying too openly her alarm, she pressed him to give up the bank position and seek work in the open air—work that would prove less devitalizing to a person of his peculiar temperament.

One of the results of debility from overwork is, apparently, that it deprives the victim of his initiative—makes him fearful of giving up his hold upon the meager means of sustenance that he has, lest he shall be unable to grasp another. Louis was in debt, earning scarcely enough for their living expenses, too proud to let Velma help as she longed to do, his game leg putting him at a disadvantage in the industrial field. In fact, he was in just the predicament I desired, but I knew that in time her wishes would prevail.

The circumstance, however, that deprived me of all hope of completely usurping his place was this: I could not, for any length of time, face the gaze of Velma's eyes. The personified truth, the purity that dwelt in them, seemed to dissolve my power, to beat me back into the secondary relationship I had come to occupy toward Louis.

He was sometimes tempted to tell her: "You give me my one grip on sanity." I have witnessed his panic at the thought of losing her, at the thought that some day she might give him up in disgust at his aberrations, and abandon him to the formless "thing" that haunted him.

Curious, to be of the world and yet not of it—to enjoy a perspective that reveals the hidden side of effects, which seem so mysterious from the material side of the veil. But I would gladly have given all the advantages of my disembodied state for one hour of flesh-and-blood companionship with Velma.

My alternative plan was this: If I could not enter her world, what was to prevent me from *bringing Velma into mine?* Daring? To be sure.

6

UNVERSED as I was in the laws that govern this mystery of passing from the physical into another state of existence, I could only hope that the plan would work. It might—and that was enough for me. I took a gambler's chance. By risking all, I might gain all—might gain——

The thought of what I might gain transported me to a heaven of pain and ecstasy. Velma and I—in a world apart, a world of our own—free from the sordid trammels that mar the perfection of the rosiest earth-existence. Velma and I—together through all eternity!

This much reason I had for hoping: I observed that other persons passed through the change called death, and that some entered a state of being in which I was conscious of them and they of me. Uninteresting creatures they were, almost wholly preoccupied with their former earth-interests; but they were as much in the world as I had been in the world of Velma and Louis before that fragment of shrapnel ruled me out of the game.

A few, it was true, on passing from their physical habitations, seemed to emerge into a sphere to which I could not follow. This troubled me. Velma might do likewise. Yet I refused to admit the probability—refused to consider the possible failure of my plan. The very intensity of my longing would draw her to me.

The gulf that separated us was spanned by the grave. Once Velma had crossed to my side of the abyss, there would be no going back to Louis.

Yet I was cunning. She must not come to me with overpowering regrets that would cause her to hover about Louis as I now hovered about her. If I could inspire her with horror and loathing for him—ah! if I only could!

As a preliminary step, I must induce Louis to buy the instrument with which my purpose was to be accomplished. This was not easy, for on nights when he left the bank during shopping hours he was sufficiently vigorous to resist my will. I could work only through suggestion.

In a pawnshop that he passed daily I had noticed a revolver prominently displayed. My whole effort was concentrated upon bringing this to his attention.

The second night, he glanced at the revolver, but did not stop. Three nights later, drawn by a fascination for which he could not have accounted, he paused and looked at it for several minutes, fighting an urge that seemed to command: *"Step in and buy! Buy! Buy!"*

When, a few evenings later, he arrived home with the revolver and a box of cartridges that the pawnbroker had included in the sale, he put them hastily out of sight in a drawer of his desk.

He said nothing about his purchase, but the next day Velma came across the weapon and questioned him regarding it.

Visibly confused, he replied: "Oh, I thought we might need something of the sort. Saw it in a window, and the notion of having it sort of took hold of me. There's been a lot of housebreaking lately, and it's just as well to be prepared."

And now with impatience I waited for the opportunity to stage my denouement.

It came at the end of the month, when Louis, after a prolonged day's work, returned home after midnight, his brain benumbed with poring over interminable columns of figures. When his feet ascended the stairs to his apartment it was not his faculties that directed them, but mine—cunning, alert, aflame with deadly purpose.

Never was more weird preliminary to a murder—the entering, in guise of a dear, familiar form, of a fiend incarnate,

intent upon destroying the flower of the home. I speak of a fiend incarnate, even though I was that fiend, for I did not enter Louis' body in full expression of my faculties. Taking up physical life, my recollection of existence as a spirit entity was always shadowy. I carried through the dominating impulses that had actuated me on entering the body, but scarcely more. And the impulse I had carried through that night was the impulse to kill.

7

WITH utmost caution, I entered the bedroom.

My control of Louis' body was complete. I felt, for perhaps the first time, so corporeally secure that the vague dread of being driven out did not oppress me.

The room was dark, but the soft, regular breathing of Velma, asleep, reached my ears. It was like the invitation that rises in the scent of old wine which the lips are about to quaff—quickening my eagerness and setting my brain on fire.

I did not think of love. I lusted—but my lust was to destroy that beautiful body—to *kill!*

However, I was cunning—*cunning!* With caution, I felt my way toward the desk and secured the revolver, filling its chambers with leaden emissaries of death. When all was in readiness, I switched on the light.

She wakened almost instantly. As the radiance flooded the room, a startled cry rose to her lips. It froze, unuttered, as, half rising, she met my gaze.

Her beauty, the raven blackness of her hair falling over her bare shoulders and full, heaving bosom, fanned the flame of my gory passion into fury. In an ecstasy of triumph, I stood drinking in the picture.

While I temporized with the lust to kill—prolonging the exquisite sensation—she was battling for self-control.

"Louis!" The name was gasped through bloodless lips.

Involuntarily, I shrank, reeling a little under her gaze. A dormant something seemed to rise in feeble protest at what I sought to do. The leveled revolver wavered in my hand. But the note of panic in her voice revived my purpose. I laughed—mockingly.

"Louis!" her tone was sharp, but edged with terror. "Louis—*put down that pistol!* You don't know what you are doing."

She struggled to her feet and now stood before me. God! how beautiful—how tempting that bare white bosom!

"Put down that pistol!" she ordered hysterically.

She was frantic with fear. And her fear was like the blast of a forge upon the white heat of my passion.

I mocked her. A shrill, maniacal laugh burst from my throat. She had said I didn't know what I was doing! Oh, yes, I did!

"I'm going to kill you!—*kill you!*" I shrieked, and laughed again.

She swayed forward like a wraith, as I fired. Or perhaps that was the trick played by my eyes as darkness overwhelmed me.

A FEW fragmentary pictures stand out in my recollection like clear-etched cameos on the scroll of the past. One is of Louis, standing dazedly—slightly swaying as with vertigo—looking down at the smoking revolver in his hand. On the floor before him a crumpled figure in ebony and white and vivid crimson. Then a confusion of frightened men and women in oddly assorted nondescript attire—uniformed officers bursting into the room and taking the revolver from Louis'

unresisting hand—clumsy efforts at lifting the white-robed body to the bed—a crimson stain spreading over the sheet—a doctor, attired in collarless shirt and wearing slippers, bending over her. . . .

Finally, after a lapse of hours, a hushed atmosphere—efficient nurses—the beginning of delirium.

And one other picture—of Louis, cringing behind the bars of his cell, denied the privilege of visiting his wife's bedside — crushed, dreading the hourly announcement of her death—filled with unspeakable horror of himself.

Velma still lived. The bullet had pierced her left lung and life hung by a tenuous thread. Hovering near, I watched with dispassionate interest the battle for life. For the time I seemed emotionally spent. I had made a supreme effort—events would now take their inevitable course and show whether I had accomplished my purpose. I felt neither anxious nor overjoyed, neither regretful nor triumphant—merely impersonally curious.

A fever set in, lessening Velma's slender chances of recovery. In her delirium, her thoughts seemed always of Louis. Sometimes she breathed his name pleadingly, tenderly, then cried out in terror at some fleeting rehearsal of the scene in which he stood before her, the glitter of insanity in his eyes, the leveled revolver in his hand. Again she pleaded with him to give up his work at the bank; and at other times she seemed to think of him as over on the battlefields of Europe.

Only once did she apparently think of me — when she whispered the name by which I had called her: *"Winkie!"* and added, *"Dick!"* But, save for this exception, it was always "Louis! Louis!"

Her constant reiteration of his name finally dispelled the apathy of my spirit. *Louis!* All the vengeful fury toward him I had experienced when my soul went hurtling into the region of the disembodied returned with thwarted intensity.

When Velma's fever subsided, when the long fight for recovery began and she fluttered from the borderland back into the realm of the physical, when I knew I had failed—balked of my prey, I had at least this satisfaction:

Never again would these two — the man I hated and the woman for whom I hungered—never again would they be to each other as they had been in the past. The perfection of their love had been irretrievably marred. Never would she meet his gaze without an inward shrinking. Always on his part—on both their parts—there would be an undercurrent of fear that the incident might recur—a grisly menace, poisoning each moment of their lives together.

I had not schemed and contrived—and dared—in vain.

This was the thought I hugged when Louis was released from jail, upon her refusal to prosecute. It caused me sardonic amusement when, in their first embrace, the tears of despair rained down their cheeks. It recurred when they began their pitiful attempt to build anew on the shattered foundation of love.

And then—creepingly, slyly, like a bird of ill omen casting the shadow of its silent wings over the landscape—came retribution.

Many times, in retrospect, I lived over that brief hour of my return to physical expression — my hour of realization. Wraith-like, arose a vision of Velma—Velma as she had stood before me that night, staring at me with horror. I saw the horror deepen—deepen to abject despair.

How beautiful she had looked! But when I tried to picture that beauty, I could recall only her eyes. It mattered not

whether I wished to see them—they filled my vision.

They seemed to haunt me. From being vaguely conscious of them, I became acutely so. Disconcertingly, they looked out at me from everywhere—eyes brimming with fear—eyes fixed and staring—filled with horrified accusation.

The beauty I had once coveted became a thing forbidden, even in memory. If I sought to peer through the veil as formerly—to witness her pathetic attempts to resume the old life with Louis — again those eyes!

God! Those eyes. There is a refinement of physical torture which consists of allowing water to fall, drop by drop, for an eternity of hours, upon the forehead of the victim. Conceive of this torture increased a thousandfold, and a faint idea may be gained of the torture that was mine—from seeing everywhere, constantly, interminably, two orbs ever filled with the same expression of horror and reproach.

Much have I learned since entering the Land of the Shades. At that time I did not know, as I know now, that my punishment was no affliction from without, but the simple result of natural law. Causes set in motion must work out their full reaction. The pebble, cast into a quiet pool, makes ripples which in time return to the place of their origin. I had cast more than a pebble of disturbance into the harmony of human life, and through my intense preoccupation in a single aim had delayed longer than usual the reaction. I had created for myself a hell. Inevitably I was drawn into it.

Gone was every desire I had known to hover near the two who had so long engrossed my attention. Haunted, harried, scourged by those dreadful accusers, I sought to fly from them to the ends of the earth. There was no escape; yet, driven frantic, I still struggled to escape, because that is the blind impulse of suffering creatures.

The emotions that had so swayed me when I tried to blast the lives of two who held me dear now seemed puny and insignificant in comparison with my suffering. No physical torment can be likened to that which engulfed me until my very being was a seething mass of agony. Through it, I hurled maledictions upon the world, upon myself, upon the creator. Horrible blasphemies I uttered.

And, at last—I prayed. It was but a cry for mercy—the inarticulate appeal of a tortured soul for surcease of pain—but suddenly a great peace seemed to have come upon the universe.

Bereft of suffering, I felt like one who has ceased to exist.

Out of the silence came a wordless response. It beat upon my consciousness like the buffeting of the waves. Words known to human ears would not convey the meaning of the message that was borne upon me — whether from outside source or welling up from within, I do not know. All I know is that it filled me with a strange hope.

A thousand years or a single instant—for time is a relative thing—the respite lasted. Then I sank, as it seemed, to the old level of consciousness, and the torment was renewed.

Endure it now I knew that I must—and why. A strange new purpose filled my being. The light of understanding had dawned upon my soul.

And so I came to resume my vigil in the home of Velma and Louis.

II

A BRAVE heart was Velma's—dauntless and true.

With the effects of the tragedy still apparent in her pallor and weakness, and in

the shaken demeanor and furtive, self-distrustful attitude of Louis, she yet succeeded in finding a place for him as overseer of a small country estate.

I have said that I ceased to feel the torment of passion for Velma in the greater torment of her reproach. Ah! but I had never ceased to love her! As I now realized, I had desecrated that love, had transmuted it into a horrible travesty, had, in my abysmal ignorance, sought to obtain what I desired by destroying it; yet, beneath all, I had loved.

Well I know, now, that had I succeeded in my intention toward her, Velma would have ascended to a sphere utterly beyond my comprehension. Merciful fate had diverted my aim—had made possible some faint restitution.

I returned to Velma, loving her with a love that had come into its own, a love unselfish, untainted by thought of possession. But, to help her, I must again hurt her cruelly.

Out of the chaos of her life she had slowly restored a semblance of harmony. Almost she succeeded in convincing Louis that their old peaceful companionship had returned; but to one who could read her thoughts, the nightmare thing that hovered between them weighed cruelly upon her soul.

She was never quite able to look into her husband's eyes without a lurking suspicion of what might lie in their depths; never able to compose herself for sleep without a tremor lest she should wake to find herself confronted by a fiend in his form. I had done my work only too well!

Now, slowly and inexorably, I began again undermining Louis' mental control. The old ground must be traversed anew, because he had gained in strength from the respite I had allowed him, and his outdoor life gave him a mental vigor with which I had not been obliged to contend before. On the other hand, I was equipped with new knowledge of the power I intended to wield.

I shall not relate again the successive stages by which I succeeded, first in influencing his will, then in partially subduing it, and, finally, in driving his personality into the background for indefinite periods. The terror that overwhelmed him when he realized that he was becoming a prey to his former aberrations may be imagined.

To shield Velma, I performed my experiments, when possible, while he was away from her. But she could not long be unaware of the moodiness, the haggard droop of his shoulders which accompanied his realization that the old malady had returned. The deepening terror in her expression was like a scourge upon my spirit—but I must wound her in order to cure.

More than once, I was forced to exert my power over Louis to prevent him from taking violent measures against himself. As I gained the ascendancy, a determination to end it all grew upon him. He feared that unless he took himself out of Velma's life, the insanity would return and force him again to commit a frenzied assault upon the one he held most dear. Nor could he avoid seeing the apprehension in her manner that told him she knew — the shrinking that she bravely tried to conceal.

Though my power over him was greater than before, it was intermittent. I could not always exercise it. I could not, for example, prevent his borrowing a revolver one day from a neighboring farmer, on pretense of using it against a marauding dog that had lately visited the poultry yard. Though I knew his true intention, the utmost that I could do—for his personality was strong at the time—

was to influence him to postpone the deed he contemplated.

That night, I took possession of his body while he slept. Velma lay, breathing quietly, in the next room—for as this dreaded thing came upon him they had, through tactit understanding, come to occupy separate bedrooms.

Partially dressing, I stole downstairs and out to the tool-shed where Louis, fearing to trust it near him in the house, had hidden the revolver. As I returned, my whole being rebelled at the task before me; yet it was unavoidable, if I would restore to Velma what I had wrenched from her.

Quietly though I entered her room, a gasp, or rather a quick, hysterical intake of breath, warned me that she had wakened.

I flashed on the light.

She made no sound. Her face went white as marble. The expression in her eyes was that which had tortured me into the depths of a hell more frightful than any conceived by human imagination.

A moment I stood swaying before her, with leveled revolver, as I had stood on that other occasion, months before. Slowly, I lowered the revolver, and smiled—not as Louis would have smiled but as a maniac, formed in his likeness, would have smiled.

Her lips framed the word "Louis," but, in the grip of despair, she made no sound. It was the despair not merely of a woman who felt herself doomed to death, but of a woman who consigned her loved one to a fate worse than death.

Still I smiled—with growing difficulty, for Louis' personality was restive and my time in the usurped body was short.

In that moment, I was not anxious to give up his body. At this new glimpse of her beauty through physical sight, my love for Velma flamed into hitherto unrealized intensity. For an instant my purpose in returning was forgotten. Forgotten was the knowledge of the ages which I had sipped since last I occupied the body in which I faced her. Forgotten was everything save—Velma.

As I took a step forward, my arms outstretched, my eyes expressing God knows what depth of yearning, she uttered a scream.

Blackness surged over me. I stumbled. I was being forced out—out. . . . That cry of terror had vibrated through the soul of Louis and he was struggling to answer it. Instinctively I battled against the darkness, clung to my hard-won ascendancy. A moment of conflict, and again I prevailed.

Once more I smiled. The effect of it must have been weird, for I was growing weaker and Louis had returned to the attack with overwhelming persistence. My tongue strove for expression:

"Sorry — Winkie — it won't happen again—I'm not—coming—back——"

WHEN I recovered from the momentary unconsciousness that accompanies transition from the physical to the spiritual, Louis was looking in affright at the huddled figure of Velma, who had fainted away. The next instant, he had gathered her in his arms.

Though I had come near failing in the attempt to deliver my message, I had no fear that my visit would prove in vain. With clear prescience, I knew that my utterance of that old familiar nickname, "Winkie," would carry untold meaning to Velma; that hereafter she would fear no more what she might see in the depths of her husband's eyes; that with a return of her old confidence in him, the specter of apprehension would be banished for ever from their lives.

Coming Next Month

ONLY one light burned in that grim structure—one light, pale and yellow behind the masked window of the upstairs room. I knocked hesitantly, and there was no answer. My hand trembled on the latch. The door swung open, and silently we entered.

There in the dark we stood side by side, the woman and I, and neither of us spoke. In the far corner of the room a feeble shaft of light descended from the ceiling, revealing the top rungs of the ladder and the uneven surface of the wall beside it. The aperture was closed. From the chamber above us came the deep, singsong voice of Peter Mace, uttering words which brought sudden terror to my heart.

There is no need to repeat those words here. Enough to say that the horror, this time, was nearing its climax—that *other* voices, born of lips which had no human form, were slowly and terribly rising in a shrill crescendo, smothering the blasphemies which poured from the boy's throat. Even while the veiled woman and I stood motionless, those sounds rose to a mighty roar, screaming their triumph. And with them came the shrill, awful outcry of a woman in mortal anguish.

I wish now that I had yielded to the fear in my soul and fled from that evil place. I wish I had seized my companion's arm and dragged her back across the threshold. Instead, I remained rooted to the floor. I stood rigid, listening to the medley of mad voices that bellowed above me.

The whole house echoed those wild vibrations. Words of terrible significance, of frightful suggestiveness, were flung out of monstrous throats, to wail and scream into the deepest depths of my consciousness. Again and again I heard names hurled out which bore sufficient significance to spike my soul with nameless and uncontrollable dread. And above them all, *within* them all, shrilled that wild screech of physical agony which tocsined from a woman's lips! . . .

You will want to read this utterly different and startling story, about a corpse-woman, and a man who hid himself away from the world. This story of dark sorcery will be printed complete in the August number of WEIRD TALES:

THE ISLE OF DARK MAGIC

By HUGH B. CAVE

——ALSO——

DUST OF GODS

By C. L. MOORE

A fascinating story, stupendous in its scope, about a terrific adventure and the funeral pyre of one of the elder gods—by the author of "Shambleau."

THE DISTORTION OUT OF SPACE

By FRANCIS FLAGG

A weird-scientific story of a strange being that came from the unplumbed deeps of outer space in a meteoroid.

THE DEVIL IN IRON

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A tale of Conan the barbarian, a weird and terrible adventure and an amazing island city of green stone.

THE BEAST-HELPER

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

The story of a dictator who sought to hold power by allying himself psychically with a powerful beast.

Also, another thrilling installment of Arlton Eadie's astounding weird mystery novel, "The Trail of the Cloven Hoof."

August WEIRD TALES Out August 1

THE suggestion has frequently appeared in the Eyrie that we devote one page in each issue to biographies of our authors. We expressed ourselves as loth to run such a department, inasmuch as many authors of fascinating fiction lead very ordinary lives—in which respect they are not different from the authors who write for other magazines. But the question is up to you, the readers. If enough of you request an author's page each month, we will swallow our objections to it; for the magazine belongs to you.

For Author's Autobiographies

Ernest H. Ormsbee, of Albany, New York, writes: "Being an old fan of yours, I have been interested in your Eyrie discussions about publishing 'get acquainted' biographies of your various story contribs. Individuals have rights—and one of them is the right to privacy if he wants it. Readers also have rights, but I do not feel that among them is the privilege of digging up a writer's privacy if he does not want it dug up. All of this puts the editor in an embarrassing position. There is a glamor about the mysterious writer 'whom no one knows' that is bound to be lost by pitiless publicity. There is a solution, however. *The Literary Digest* faced this same difficulty in regard to its cartoonists, and the editor overcame it by sheer common sense. Give the readers their biographies if they want them, but make them autobiographies: let the contrib submit whatever he wants the reader to have, or nothing at all if he feels that way. The average reader is a funny individual. He is easily satisfied, or at least pacified—and this autobiography is being fair to both sides. . . . Speaking of the nudes on your covers, I can best express my contempt for 'the maiden aunts' by repeating Judge David: 'Some people want you to put pants on a horse!' "

Is This Sarcasm?

A. B. Leonard, of Portsmouth, Ohio, writes: "By all means give us an author's page. Nearly all of the cheap magazines have one, and surely WT wishes to join this enterprising group. And, too, how can we, the readers, really enjoy the stories in WT unless we know what kind of cigarettes the author smokes, or the color of his dressing-gown? That one item alone has detracted from Seabury Quinn's stories for years. If only we knew for sure whether he sports a mauve gown with cerise stripes, or prefers a quiet scarlet one trimmed with violet! Is it true that Edmond Hamilton smokes 'Interplanetarios'? Please tell us what Robert E. Howard eats for breakfast and what kind of soap Clark Ashton Smith uses in his bath. Does C. L. Moore prefer Sealyhams to Pekes and what does Carl Jacobi buy with the money he gets from his stories? How far did E. Hoffmann Price go in school? By all means give us an author's page! Yeah!"

Conan and Northwest Smith

A. Coffey, of Port Ludlow, Washington, writes: "I have been a steady reader of your magazine since first you started publishing it, but this is my first comment. I have always found your stories varied and entertaining and am only asking now for you to keep up the stories of those two bold, very interesting and yet not so good young men, Northwest Smith, and Conan the barbarian. Northwest takes us into the history-making, romantic frontiers of the future, while Conan brings them to us out of the past. So keep up the

(Please turn to page 140)

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established in early 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934
Jan.	Jan.	----	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
----	----	----	Feb.-Mar.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	----		----	Mar.	Mar.
Apr.	Apr.	----	Apr.-May	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
----	May	----		----	May	May
June	June	----	Jun.-Jul.	June	June	June
July	July	July		July	July	----
Aug.	----	----	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	----
Sept.	----	----	----	Sept.	Sept.	----
Oct.	----	----	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	----
Nov.	----	----	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	----
Dec.	----	Dec.	----	Dec.	Dec.	----

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

WEIRD TALES

840 N. Michigan Ave. Chicago, Illinois

(Continued from page 138)

good work and don't worry about the covers as long as we have these two bold, bad and glamorous men with us."

Man or Woman?

J. J. O'Donnell, of New York City, writes: "I notice a query in the Eyrie from a reader, as to whether M. Brundage, your cover artist, is a man or a woman. I took it for granted that M. Brundage was a man, but after thinking it over I am sure that I was wrong and I feel certain that the artist in question is a woman. Aside from the delicacy of this artist's work (surely that betokens a woman), the initial M should have told me, for there are any number of feminine first names beginning in M—Mary, Margaret, Millicent, Mildred, Marjorie, Marylin, Mollie, Maizie, Mabel, Myrtle, Martha, to mention just a few—but I can not recall, offhand, even one masculine first name beginning with M." [How about Max, Manuel, or Manfred? Two presidents of the United States—Martin Van Buren and Millard Fillmore—had first names beginning with M; yet neither of them was ever suspected of being a woman.—THE EDITOR.]

An Admirer of Howard

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The May issue of WEIRD TALES is by far the best since January, and your cover is certainly the finest ever done by Brundage. By all means stick to the nudes, as they really lend a certain amount of charm to an illustration depicting a fantastic or imaginative theme. It seems to me that the work of Robert E. Howard has been particularly good of late, and his current story, *Queen of the Black Coast,* was the outstanding story this month. . . . C. L. Moore takes second honors with his gem of fantasy, *Scarlet Dream,* the best he has yet written for WEIRD TALES. Moore has great possibilities as a writer of weird fiction, and I sincerely hope that you will continue to print many more of his fine stories. . . . It was also a great treat to read Sugarman's *The Gray Death* over again. Why don't some of those writers of ten years ago get busy and give us a few new stories? And by all means please continue to use only stories from your own magazine in the reprint department. I hope you will soon decide to reprint the following: *In Amundsen's Tent, The Greatest Gift, Bimini, The Girl from Samarcand,* and *The Space-Eaters.* . . . As usual, Clark Ashton Smith gave us a treat with his little fantasy, *The Tomb-Spawn,* and A. Leslie's poem *Atavism* was the best in months."

From Far-away Africa

D. de Woronin, of Bulawayo, Rhodesia, writes: "'Tis a long cry from the heart of the darkest of all continents to the land of space-ships and what-nots, but, seeing that I have been reading WEIRD TALES for over a year, I simply can not hold back any longer this mighty yell. Permit me, without offense to friend or foe, to unburden my mind. To start with, taken all round, the magazine is matchless and improving with every issue. The covers? I have two quarrels with them—no, not the usual ones re nudes. The first is that they do not always illustrate a story inside. The second is that, exquisite as they are, they could be improved by endowing the little ladies with more realistic proportions. . . . Without the slightest hesitation I proclaim *Shambleau* the best story since January, 1933 (when I first started reading WT), and *The Sapphire Goddess* a very close second. With regard to the types of stories I like best—the weirder the better, especially if the doings take place on some other planet, in some other dimension, or in the forgotten past (like the Conan stories)."

For More Novels

R. E. Clarry, of Toronto, writes: "I had to write and tell you what a wonderful magazine you publish. It is easily the finest of its type on the market, and surpasses anything else I have ever read. Incidentally, this flattery is occasioned by my reading only one copy of your publication. I had never read a copy before I read your April number, so you see I am what you would call an 'instantly converted' reader. It was the name of the magazine that drew me toward it. I have always been attracted to the bizarre, and I hoped to find this element in a magazine with such a title: WEIRD TALES. But I didn't stumble across the book till the other day, and just by accident at that. I had actually given up hope of ever finding it in Toronto. I came to the conclusion that the

tariff at the border had kept it out—it has with so many, you know. Magazines published in U. S. are infinitely superior to our own, to my way of thinking; yet they are not allowed to enter. Usually they must be printed in Canada on Canadian paper or they are barred, unless fabulous rates of duty can be imposed. . . . I think your magazine could become even better by the publishing of more novels. Short-stories have never appealed to me as much as novels because they are too abrupt, too machine-made. A novel is more real, because it has looser, freer movement. The short-story is more compact, more compressed. The comparison could be likened to the machine-made and the hand-made cigarette. The one looks better, is packed tighter; but it hasn't the taste of the looser, hand-rolled type. . . . WEIRD TALES is so definitely and essentially in a class by itself, that the modern, humdrum fiction that one can read anywhere pales into insignificance. Your stories are entering new, untrodden fields; but the fields of ordinary fiction are trampled into dry dust by the multitude of writers in them."

She Likes Our Covers

Writes Miss Viola Frank, of Gloversville, New York: "WEIRD TALES is supreme! Your cover designs are perfect! In fact, the whole magazine is perfect! I noticed in your May issue, one man was slamming the cover design—'nudes' as he called them. Why? Certainly a woman's body is nothing to be ashamed of. Please don't change your covers any—I always have some of your magazines lying on my book stand and they certainly have caused a lot of people to start reading them. I haven't any preference as to your stories. The Conan stories are always good. And the space stories are different—I also noticed that one man objected to these. I'd like to see him find a story like *Scarlet Dream* and *Shambleau* in a mere interplanetary magazine. *I hope he sees that!*"

"Cut Out the Nudes"

Paul Freehafer, of Payette, Idaho, writes: "My favorite stories in the May issue are *The Satanic Piano, Vampires of the Moon, Queen of the Black Coast* (the best of the Conan stories, by the way), and *Scarlet Dream*. . . . I do not like your policy in regard to the nudes on the covers. I am a

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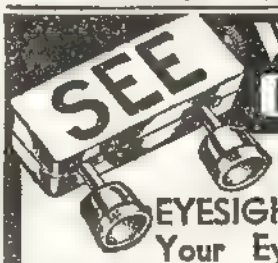

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faithful science-fiction and weird-fiction fan, and on numerous occasions I have tried to do my bit to introduce others to my favorite magazines. Unfortunately my success with WEIRD TALES has been poor. When I hand a copy to a friend, giving it a hearty recommendation, he will give first the cover and then me a fishy stare that says as plainly as words, 'So that's the kind of magazines you read!' Therefore I implore you, in the name of weird fiction, cut out the nudes and give us some really weird covers that express the true contents of the magazine."

A Pleasing Variety

John Pemberton, of Palouse, Washington, writes to the editor: "Though I am not addicted to writing fan letters, I may say that I have read your magazine constantly for eight or nine years, and never have I enjoyed it more than at present. You seem to have the happy knack of picking stories, while in general along the same line, different enough to keep the reader from becoming jaded with the everlasting horror and mystery."

In Defense of Hamilton

B. H. Lamore, of Silver Spring, Maryland, writes to the Eyrie: "Referring to the opinion of Mr. Donald A. Wollheim that *The Man Who Returned* 'was probably Edmond Hamilton's worst', I wish to say that in this case Mr. Hamilton must be a wonder. I doubt that you have ever published a story in which the sequence of events was so absolutely logical. Each one was the inevitable result of the preceding one, and in my opinion there was not a weak point in the story."

The Solitary Hunters

Writes Henry Hasse of Indianapolis: "Please accept my belated thanks in appreciation of *The Solitary Hunters*. It was not only the best story Doctor Keller ever wrote, but was one of the ten best that ever appeared in WEIRD TALES. I was very pleased to see that the readers voted on *every one* of the three installments as being the best story in the issue. That sets a record of some kind, doesn't it?" [It does.—THE EDITOR.]

Ghouls and Vampires

Charles Byerton, of New York City, writes to the Eyrie: "I always enjoy WT, but ghouls and vampires and interplanetary stories should be restrained a little. I put in a plea for the stories of 'haunts' that are either not evil, or actually good. Charles Lamb's old friend who did not fear the ghost children is a case in point. . . . Incidentally Conan's contemporaries seem to have sold slave-girls nude—would not M. Brundage

---

My favorite stories in the July WEIRD TALES are:

	Story	Remarks
(1)	"Master Of Souls"	****
(2)	"I. The Gates Of S.G."	*****
(3)		

I do not like the following stories:

(1)		Why?
(2)		

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in WEIRD TALES if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:
Ben Warner
4334 Highland

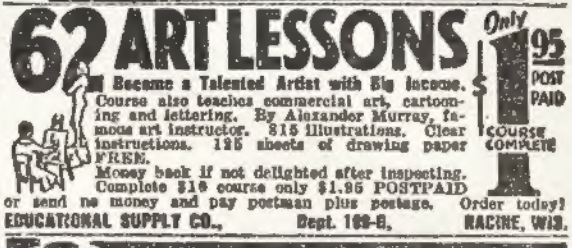
do a good slave-market scene, with some of the merchandise cowering in the background while a princess in golden fetters is on the block?"

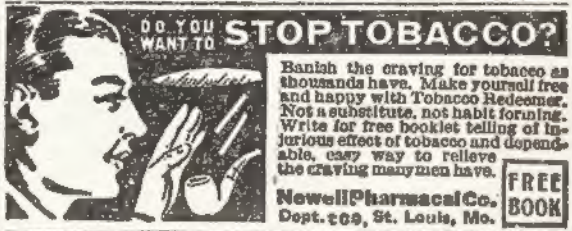
Up Jumped the Devil

Good old Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes: "The May issue of WEIRD TALES might be called my birthday issue, as my birthday falls in that month. It's a nice present, too. The cover is one of Brundage's best. It is weird and well done. The new serial, *Vampires of the Moon,* is going to be a dandy. It's the number one story in the May issue. But why such short installments? I do not believe that 25 to 30 pages is too long for your serial installments. Carl Jacobi scores again with *The Satanic Piano.* It was plenty weird and held my interest from the first word to the last. The conclusion of *Satan's Garden* came fully up to expectations—a story truly worthy of E. Hoffmann Price. . . . The interior make-up of WEIRD TALES has improved considerably. The illustrations are better, the editorial comments on the stories between heavy lines look nice (use these with all stories), and the Eyrie is greatly improved. Let us have an author's page if the author's picture is included. The next issue is sure to be a corker with Williamson having the feature story."

Nothing Wrong, We'd Say

T. Schurgot, of Philadelphia, writes: "When I first started to read your magazine some years ago I was under the impression that anyone who read such stuff and enjoyed it as much as I did, and continued to read and enjoy it, was not quite right. However, since your magazine still continues to appear on the news stands and elsewhere, I have come to several conclusions. First, that publishers do not print and publish magazines just for the fun of printing them, so there must of a certainty be a pretty good steady sale of WT. Which leads me to the second thought, that there must be a lot of people like myself who like WT, and if so, maybe I am all right after all; so I continue to read your magazine with a great deal more of comfort. . . . My favorite authors are Robert E. Howard, with his marvelous scrappers (who doesn't like a good fight?), Clark Ashton Smith, Seabury Quinn, Doctor Keller, and Mr. Lovecraft. . . . I miss Solomon





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NEXT MONTH

Dust of Gods

By C. L. MOORE

HERE is a fascinating story, cosmic in its scope, by the author of "Shambleau" and "Black Thirst." It is a tale of the elder gods, who reigned on distant planets and worlds now frozen, in forgotten centuries, and an evil attempt to resurrect the chief of these legendary deities and restore it to power.

THROUGH this tale strides the strange figure of Northwest Smith, the hero of "Black Thirst." You can not afford to miss this story of his terrific adventure and the funeral pyre of a god. It will be printed complete

in the August issue of

WEIRD TALES

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Kane, but Conan, the mighty, the skull-cracker, is my favorite just now."

A Novel About Atlantis

Carl J. Smith, of Port Felix, Nova Scotia, writes to the Eyrie: "Please write a six-part serial of Atlantis along the lines of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, with a vivid description of life in the principal city, and leading up to the destruction of the continent as a grand climax. The near approach of some planetary body could be the cause, with consequent terrific earthquakes, belching volcanoes; and the escape of a few survivors in the lurid darkness, etc. That would be some story!"

Against Interplanetary Stories

Martha Evans, of Norfolk, Virginia, writes: "I would cast my vote against interplanetary stories, as they are seldom weird and do not belong in your magazine. As to vampire stories: if the authors would leave more to the imagination and not have so many corpses stalking around they would go over better. Some are weird and some are not. Ideal types of stories for WEIRD TALES are Price's *Tarbis of the Lake*, Merritt's *The Woman of the Wood*, Owen's *The Ox-Cart*, and the strange and unearthly *Scarlet Dream* by C. L. Moore in this month's issue. These stories are truly weird."

From a Hardened Horror Fan

Fred Anger, of Berkeley, California, writes to the Eyrie: "The April number was real good. . . . Hamilton scores with his *Corsairs of the Cosmos*—he takes the cake when it comes to weird-scientific stories; I never have read one that was boring. If C. L. Moore can keep up the pace set by *Shambleau* and *Black Thirst*, he is invaluable. He reaches horror in the extreme; it even makes some of us hardened horror fans shudder."

Best-Liked Story

Readers, what story do you like best in this issue of WEIRD TALES? Write a letter to the Eyrie, or fill out the coupon on page 142. Your favorite story in the May issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *Scarlet Dream*, by C. L. Moore. This was closely pressed for first place by Robert E. Howard's stirring tale, *Queen of the Black Coast*.

W. T.—9

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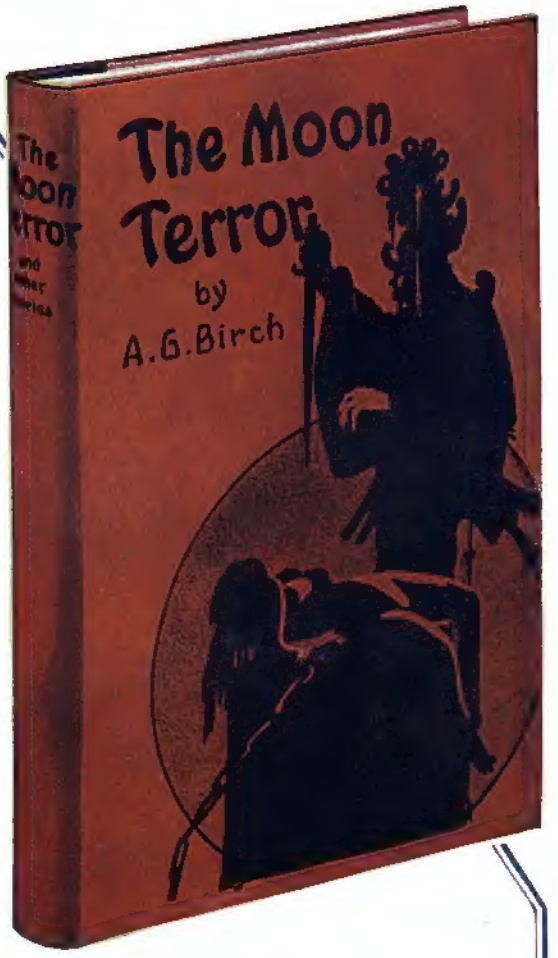
THE first warning of the stupendous cataclysm that befell the earth in the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century was recorded simultaneously in several parts of America. At twelve minutes past 3 o'clock a. m., during a lull in the night's aerial business, several of the larger stations of the Western hemisphere began picking up strange signals out of the ether. They were faint and ghostly, as if coming from a vast distance. As far as anyone could learn, the signals originated nowhere upon the earth. *It was as if some phantom were whispering through the ether in the language of another planet.*



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